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JULY 2024

NO.1 FOR PS5

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RPG SPECIAL!

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VISIONS OF MANA

18 years on: how Square Enix planned the perfect return for the series

→ DEV INTERVIEW

FINAL FANTASY XIV

The secrets to designing job classes detailed

THE PERSONA DEV RETURNS!

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI V: VENGEANCE

EXCLUSIVE ACCESS The original demon summoner returns! How dual campaigns, hundreds of devilish allies, and a ruined Tokyo make for the RPG of a lifetime

FIGHT ON!

We travel to Japan to get beaten up – all in the name of gaming science

→ EXPERT VERDICT

STELLAR BLADE: DRESSED TO KILL?

Troubleshooting Sony's live-wire cyborg slash-'em-up

→ BLAST FROM THE PAST

SLEEPING DOGS DRAGS US BACK IN

Revisiting the Hong Kong crime caper we can't quit

FUTURE
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NINTENDO SWITCH

Nintendo

Is Mario cut-out to save the Crystal Stars?

PAPER MARIO
THE THOUSAND-YEAR DOOR

23.05.2024

Get ready for an adventure that'll crease you up!

Peach sends Mario a treasure map... then disappears. Upon learning about the legend of the Crystal Stars, Mario sets out to find them. It's time to track down Peach and open the Thousand-Year Door!

7
www.pegi.info

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Welcome

Gaming has come a long way since Pac-Man [gunshots heard]. For many of us, the first gaming worlds we could truly get lost in were in RPGs – world exploration mixing with constant combat and character progression to give the impression of scale like little else.

It's a genre that's definitely worth celebrating, and 2024 seems to be shaping up to be a remarkable year for it. Our cover feature for Shin Megami Tensei V: Vengeance (p42) kicks things off in style as the legendary series makes its long-awaited return to PlayStation. It's the series that spawned the mega-popular Persona games, which we detail as we take you through the series' long and complex history all the way from PS1 to PS5 (p50).

It's not the only saga that's sprouting anew: the Mana tree is blooming once again in Visions Of Mana (p58). It's been 18 years since the last mainline game was released, so we talk to the devs about how years of remasters and remakes have set the stage for a comeback. We also talk with Final Fantasy producer and director Naoki Yoshida about the challenges inherent in constantly revamping Final Fantasy XIV's job class systems with each expansion (p68).

Japan isn't just a source of top-notch RPGs, but the birthplace of fighting games as we know it. We shuttled off to Evo Japan's latest tournament (p6) to soak in new announcements, go hands-on with the latest games, and cheer on the champions.

Our reviews this month are a tantalising mix, including the long-anticipated Stellar Blade (p76) which, while something of a grab bag itself, is a cyborg smasher that's hard to put down. Likewise, Dave The Diver (p92) makes it hard to say no to one more delve into the depths to nab fresh fish for sushi, and Animal Well (p96) might be the best metroidvania we've played in years thanks to a unique blend of action and truly puzzling headscratchers.

And there's plenty more besides. We hope you enjoy reading, and find a new adventure to get lost in. See you next month!

Oscar Taylor-Kent
EDITOR
play@futurenet.com
@MrOscarTK

GAME OF THE MONTH
Sand Land
BEST DEMON
Black Doom (Shadow The Hedgehog)

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THIS MONTH'S DEMONIC DENIZENS

Alan Wen
CONTRIBUTOR
Pushed onto a plane to Japan with a 'kick me' note on his back, Alan was put through the (w)ringer at Evo Japan 2024.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Stellar Blade
BEST DEMON
Akuma (Street Fighter)

Jess Kinghorn
GAMES EDITOR
Snakes aren't evil, but scaly friends, and this Lilith character makes some interesting points. Jess has been SMT'd.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Umurangi Generation VR
BEST DEMON
Amon (Shadow Hearts)

Miriam McDonald
OPERATIONS EDITOR
With Dragon Quest XII miles off, Mana's beelancers and lime slimes will have to keep Mim's RPGetite satiated.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Animal Well
BEST DEMON
Cacodemon (Doom)

Milford Coppock
MANAGING ART EDITOR
Milf's looked at enough demon designs this month to assemble a little black book, which he's etched with strange symbols.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Planet Of Lana
BEST DEMON
Devil Jin (Tekken)

PLAY

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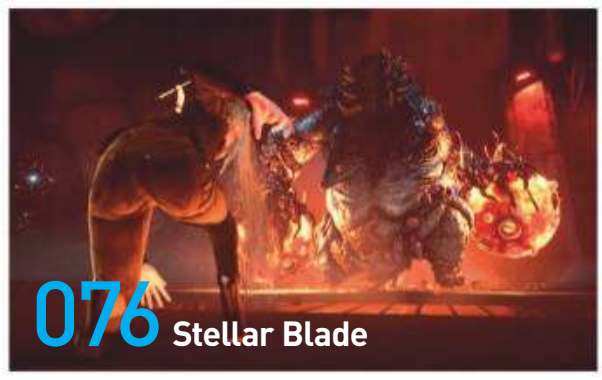

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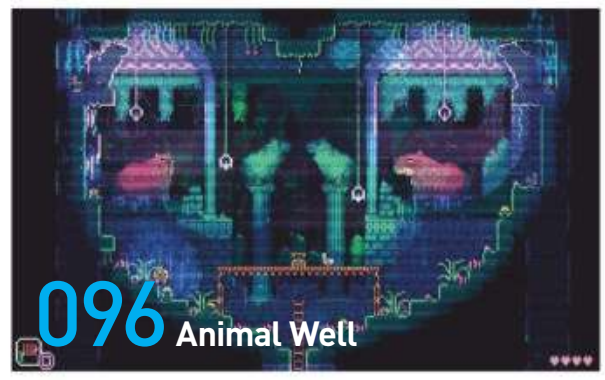

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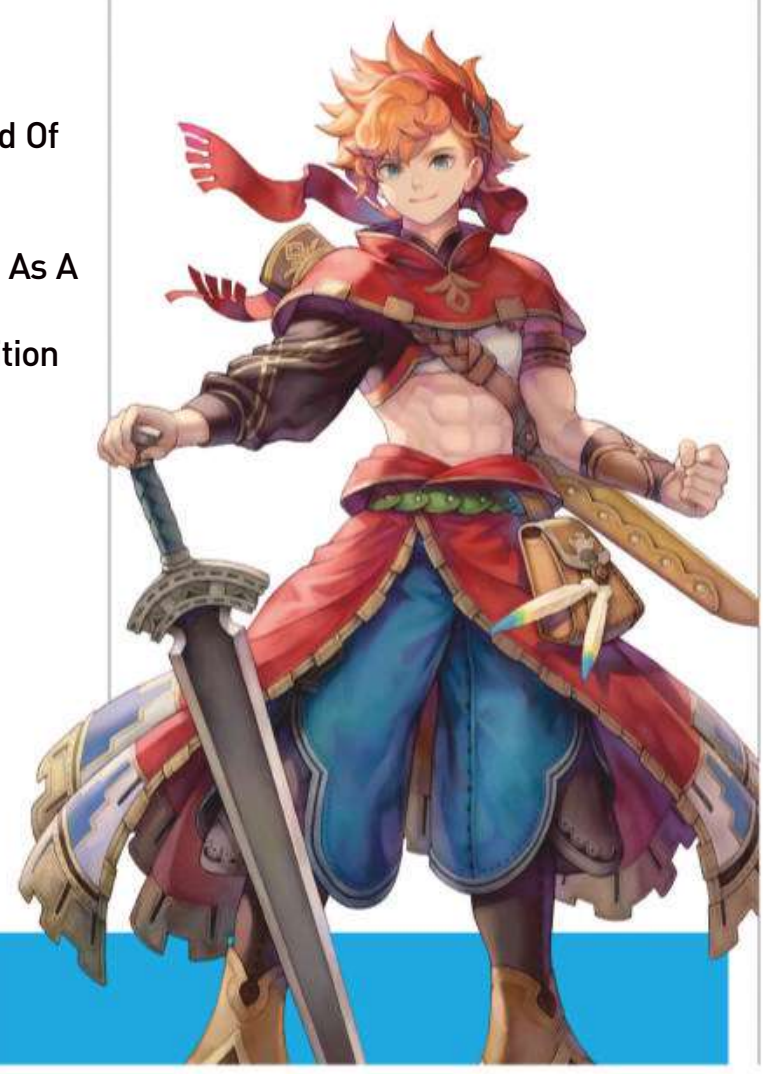

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Insider

Getting you closer to PlayStation's most exciting stories, people, and culture

It's pure fighting games overload as you can catch a cracking match whichever way you turn your head.

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Listen up! We've news of gaming concerts.

Blazing through 4,851 entrants, MenaRD secured his first Evo title in Street Fighter 6 without the threat of a bracket reset.

© EVO Japan 2024

In the ring with Japan's fighting pros

Top players and spectators enjoyed three days of fighting spirit at Evo Japan

For more than two decades, the Evolution Championship Series, better known as Evo, has been the most prestigious event for the fighting game community. While the tournament's roots are in the US, the organisers decided to honour the genre's birthplace when they introduced Evo Japan in 2018. With new titles Street Fighter 6 and Tekken 8 featuring in this year's event, we spent three days in Tokyo's Ariake Gym-Ex soaking up the fast and skilful competition.

The fighting was fierce for the duration; day one saw 350 players vie for Under Night In-Birth II Sys:Celes' championship title, while Top Six finals were held for King Of Fighters XV, Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike, and Granblue Fantasy Versus: Rising on day two. Yes, that's right, Capcom's final sprite-based fighter, Street Fighter III, was brought back as a main-stage tournament game to commemorate its 25th anniversary (it also marked the 20th anniversary of pro player Daigo's legendary parry, which put Evo on the map). It was also played on original hardware, lending extra charm, with competitors playing on arcade cabinets that had to be lugged up on stage for the Top Six.

The first two days' tournament finals were held alongside other pools for the bigger games. With three streaming stages running in parallel, it was pure fighting games overload; attendees could catch a cracking match whichever way they turned their heads, whether that was up to the big screens at the front or across at rows of monitors where players of every skill or stripe congregated. Quite often, however, the magic happened outside the streams.

Sure, the fact that everyone was wearing a Sony InZone headset meant attendees didn't get any audio of a match, while they had to be at the right place at the right time when jostling among the crowd to get a glimpse of a hot match-up. But it was worth it just to be among the presence of fighting game legends like Tokido, Daigo, and GamerBee, who, when they weren't competing, were also huddling around to watch and analyse the same matches, and usually generous about doing impromptu signings and selfies – a real slice of the FGC right there.

Fighting game legends were generous about impromptu signings and selfies.

Winners, including TempestNYC (pictured), received one million yen in prize money, as well as a year's supply of eyedrops from the main sponsor, Rohto.

FIGHTING FRENZY

On the third day the stations were cleared away to make room for seating, as crowds built up throughout the day to enjoy the spectacle of top-level players taking each other on at Guilty Gear Strive, Tekken 8, and, finally, Street Fighter 6. Developers, including Tekken's Katsuhiro Harada, also

ARE EU OKAY?

Evo's organisers hinted at the possibility of events taking place in additional locations this year, though nothing had been confirmed by the end of Evo Japan. But could it finally mean Evo Europe is happening? We're crossing our fingers.

showed up to bring the hype for their players in the form of announcements. Among them was the reveal of gentleman vampire Slayer as Strive's last DLC fighter in season 3, while Capcom not only shared a gameplay trailer for Akuma (who will have launched on SF6 by the time you read this) but also announced the next Capcom Cup will be held next year in Japan for the first time.

Ultimately, it was the matches themselves that brought the most noise, and, if anything, the finalists on stage were testament to Evo Japan's international reach. It's on par with the event's original Las Vegas iteration, with the Guilty Gear Strive championship title going to TempestNYC from the US, while the Dominican Republic's MenaRD won the SF6 crown – the first Evo title for the two-time Capcom Cup champion.

While Japan's Chikurin defeated Korea's LowHigh to secure the win for Tekken 8, it's a shame that visa issues meant there were no competitors from Pakistan at the tournament – missing faces included Arslan Ash, who's considered the greatest Tekken player in the world, with four Evo titles to his name.

BEATING CONVENTION

But while you might think the main reason to go to Evo is to compete, even if you're sent to the loser's side on your very first bout there really is plenty to enjoy as this is a full-on convention for fighting game fans. This event gave them the chance to get hands on with two challengers for the genre – there were packed queues for Riot's League Of Legends-based tag fighter 2XKO and SNK's long-awaited sequel Fatal Fury: City Of The Wolves. Hardware manufacturers like Victrix, Sanwa, and Hori also had stalls to hawk their wares, ranging from fight sticks to the leverless options first introduced by Hitbox that are quickly becoming fighting game-changers (at least, they are if your brain and muscle memory can adjust to a button-only layout).

As it was the most popular game at the event, there were plenty of options for playing SF6. You could try to last a few rounds in the version released for Japanese arcades, which still looks decent on Taito's arcade board even if it's not made in Capcom's RE Engine. One busy line, meanwhile, rewarded players who could stay on undefeated, while a legends lounge hosted opportunities for challengers to try to beat a pro like Tokido or Mena. Off the beaten track were side-events where you could compete in classic or unconventional 'fighting' games – the biggest surprise came when a secondary school student who attended Evo with her parents won the tournament for arcade and PS1 puzzle-stacker Money Idol Exchanger.

There is something for everyone at Evo Japan. We couldn't put it better than the stage presenters, who hyped up the crowd with the phrase "Kakuge saiko!" Translation? Fighting games are the best!

Get hyped for Evo 2024, which takes place from 19-21 July in Las Vegas.

The finalists on stage were testament to Evo Japan's international reach, on par with the Las Vegas event.

2XKO made its playable debut at last year's Evo, when it was still known as Project L.

© EVO Japan 2024

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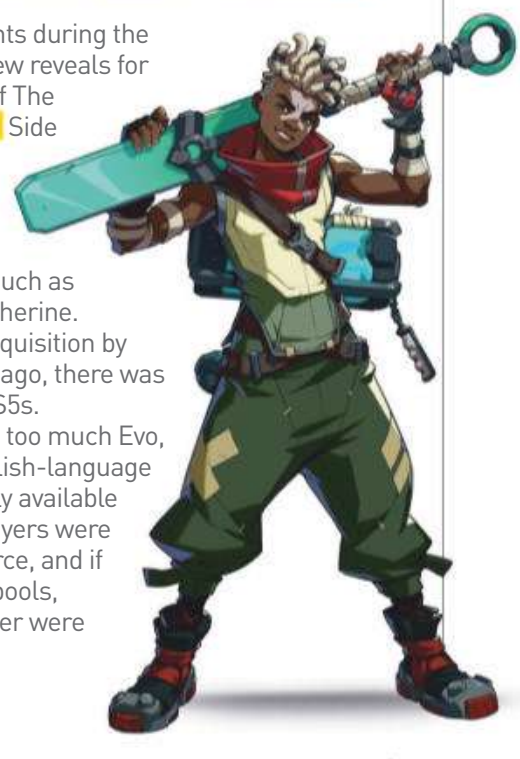
1 Announcements during the event included new reveals for Fatal Fury: City Of The Wolves' roster. **2** Side tournaments included games you might not initially consider fighting games, such as Atlus puzzler Catherine. **3** Given Evo's acquisition by Sony a few years ago, there was no shortage of PS5s. **4** You can't have too much Evo, even though English-language coverage was only available online. **5** Cosplayers were also out in full force, and if you're watching pools, quite a fair number were also attending as competitors.



WITH A LITTLE HELP
Actor Tom McKay reprises his starring role as vengeful peasant Henry, alongside Luke Dale as young Bohemian nobleman Sir Hans Capon. Henry and Hans' friendship looks set to bloom into a full-on bromance for this sequel.

News King
Jess plays town crier

Players who paid £100 for the Bite Back Edition of fang-fighting Xbox exclusive **Redfall** won't see the future content they were sold on, as parent company **Microsoft** has closed developer **Arkane Austin**.

If corporate interests push expensive season passes like this only to cut devs loose before they can deliver on that road map, then what's the point? It's just the latest live service gamble to be paid for with the livelihoods of the very developers powering the enterprise, one more heartbreak amid a seemingly never-ending wave of layoffs and closures.

Most baffling recently is **Tango GameWorks'** closure – also by Microsoft. The team boasted an impressive run of games that were commercially successful *and* critically acclaimed, including horror hit **The Evil Within** and recent PlayStation favourite **Hi-Fi Rush**. Is no-one safe? Not from corporate greed, apparently.

Bohemian rhapsody

Kingdom Come: Deliverance II will gallop onto PlayStation 5 later this year

First-person duels return, and crossbows and firearms have been added to the combat mix. Keep your head or risk losing it.

Warhorse Studios' 2018 debut introduced us to the trials and tribulations of Henry, a mediaeval peasant living in the kingdom of Bohemia during the 15th century. When a mercenary army razes his village, Henry's everyday existence ends and his quest for revenge begins.

But a man can't subsist on white-hot fury alone; Henry needs to eat and sleep just like anyone else. In fact, the first game takes such a manual approach to RPG mechanics that at launch you could only save your progress by finding a bed and tucking Henry in for the night. As he sleeps (or looks for trouble in first-person duels, or gets sloshed at the nearest public house), the world keeps on turning, with questlines progressing whether you're there to see them unfurl or not. Vengeance is patient – but it does not wait forever.

The just-announced sequel, Kingdom Come: Deliverance II, continues Henry's odyssey as he ventures to Kuttenberg (Kutná Hora in modern day Czechia) in the continued hope of avenging his parents. However, with a civil war looming, the wider political stage continues to shift below his feet... though perhaps our lad Henry can turn this to his advantage yet.

CROSSING SWORDS

Twice the size of the first game, with a revamped combat system plus tweaked hardcore systems to make it slightly more accessible, this followup looks set to deliver a bloody good time. From lushly realised forests to bustling mediaeval cities, the historically-minded open world is worth getting lost in – though it also remembers when you don't put your best foot forward. It's hard out there, and everyone needs a way to support themself, but if your sticky fingers should wander too far, people will start to notice. Consequences range from NPCs growing suspicious, with the tenor of your interactions shifting noticeably, to something much more drastic and permanent. We've all heard stories about how thieves were dealt with during the mediaeval period; which ones do you reckon are true?

But this is just one path Henry can walk: perhaps you don't want to be a sneaking scoundrel, but would rather be a charmer who can talk his way in or out of anything, or perhaps you'd prefer to settle disputes with blades and early firearms... or perhaps you'd rather free your mind and body, staggering about town au naturale. Ultimately, the choice is yours.

*** Forge your own feudal existence as Henry on PS5 later this year.**

These mean futuristic streets are a definite nod to Blade Runner. We're ready to investigate.

Endless pulp fiction

In Shadows Of Doubt, anyone could have done it

Over the years, there have been many different approaches to gamifying the detective story, but they often ended up either not managing to balance player satisfaction with busywork, or skewing so cinematic they were hardly mysterious.

With Shadows Of Doubt, ColePowered Games' solution is to sit back, take its hands off the wheel, and let you steer the investigation. You're given a sandbox containing a procedurally generated world of suspects, murder weapons, apartment buildings, and businesses, so you never know quite what you're in for. In this Blade Runner-like future, it's up to you to create a pinboard of evidence from literally any object or person you look at.

Which doesn't mean there are no rails to guide you. As a former detective, you're able to grab forms from City Hall once you've spotted a crime (often a corpse) – the city's so rife with villainy that solving murder has become routinely outsourced.

On the map, you can mark locations to follow up on evidence; you can also link evidence on your pinboard (which you can customise) with string. This is all with the goal of answering simple questions that will be validated once you've handed in your solution – chief among them being the suspect's name. Identify the murder weapon or handcuff the culprit where they stand and you'll earn extra money.

> Identify the murder weapon or handcuff the culprit where they stand and you'll earn extra money.

But you'll often need to work in the margins of the law. Deus Ex fans will love the networks of vents in each building as you play hide-and-seek with scanning CCTV cameras to find suspicious clues in other people's houses, break into security rooms to trace calls, or even nab fingerprints off someone who's nodded off in order to link them to a silenced pistol. Case closed? Then it's time to reopen another – there are plenty to solve.

Note it down: Shadows Of Doubt will sleuth its way onto PS5 later in 2024.

1

PLAY INVESTIGATES

For the players

The Game Music Festival attendees enjoyed concerts featuring music from The Last Of Us and Baldur's Gate 3

The Game Music Festival, organised by a passionate group of game music fans from Poland, made its London debut in 2022 and was held at the Southbank Centre this year. While the previous festival was a little subdued, possibly as a result of being post-pandemic, and featured a lot of music from indie games (though highly acclaimed ones, such as Cuphead), this year's sold-out event centred on music from two huge PlayStation hits: 'The Sounds Of The Fireflies' was dedicated to The Last Of Us, and 'The Symphony Of The Realms' to Baldur's Gate 3.

It's no surprise that tickets sold out. Concerts dedicated to game music are more common in the calendar these days, but this day-long celebration is the only festival dedicated to the art form. What's more, there's something classy about the Game Music Festival, possibly owing to its organisers' insistence on letting the music speak for itself rather than accompanying the performances with game visuals.

The Philharmonia Orchestra did a fantastic job for both concerts, accompanied by the Hertfordshire Chorus for the Baldur's Gate 3 performance. On top of that, there was plenty of star power. Not only were the composers in attendance, two-time Oscar winner Gustavo Santaolalla took to the stage himself, with the orchestra effectively acting as his backing band for TLOU. Meanwhile, it was like being in-game as BG3's narrator, Amelia Tyler, helped usher in the evening concert and BAFTA winner

1 Gustavo Santaolalla didn't just bring several stringed instruments, he also brought pipes – bet you didn't know he could sing! **2** Amelia Tyler, in narrator mode, takes the stage to set the mood for Baldur's-Gate-3-themed concert The Symphony Of The Realms. **3** A non-musical highlight was this panel from Baldur's Gate 3's voice actors (sorry, actors, as Karlach's Samantha Béart – second from right – was keen to emphasise). **4** Baldur's Gate fans brought another level of festivity to proceedings, with many attending the concert in cosplay.

Andrew Wincott stole the show in an encore rendition of 'Raphael's Final Act'.

One thing both concerts had in common was an emphasis on refrain. Just how many times can you listen to The Last Of Us's main theme or 'Down By The River' performed again, albeit in a slightly different arrangement with a change in instruments or vocals? Clearly the limit has yet to be reached.

One of the beauties of listening to live music is that you're not simply listening to the soundtrack, and the performers are able to take a creative approach. So for Sounds Of The Fireflies Santaolalla didn't just play instrumentals but took a few songs from his own back catalogue that fitted the TLOU's characters and themes, including a heartbreaking version of 'A Love That Will Never Grow Old', taken from his Oscar-winning soundtrack for Brokeback Mountain, which he dedicated to Bill and Frank.

MASTERCLASS ACT

As this was a festival, attendees were also treated to panels and talks throughout the day to celebrate game music as an artform – at least, they were if they managed to get inside the smaller room where these were taking place.

The panels included masterclasses from the composers. A packed room hung on Santaollala's every word, the 72-year-old legend proving a charismatic raconteur. He didn't only regale listeners with stories of his experiences working with Naughty Dog (and how his music had inspired director Neil Druckmann when developing the narrative), but also touched on his rich career, from starting a band in his youth back in Argentina to his work in cinema.

> **How many times can you listen to TLOU's theme or 'Down By The River' again? The limit has yet to be reached.**

Borislav Slavov had a somewhat harder time given his masterclass was early in the morning, preceding any concerts. But still on the high of his BG3 score winning the BAFTA Games Award for Music, he clearly had fun explaining to the audience how music alone can change the mood and players' expectations of a game sequence, before gamely taking the role of a DM in a live exercise as he selected music to match the audience's choices.

While it could be argued that one of the panels was an anomaly since it was about voice acting, there were no complaints when it meant being in the company of a few of BG3's fantastic cast, Devora Wilde (Lae'zel), Dave Jones (Halsin), Jennifer English (Shadowheart), and BAFTA nominee Samantha Béart (Karlach) sharing insights into their craft as well as, in English's words, "embracing the wank".

Given the success of this year's festival, hopefully we won't have to wait another two years for the next. And as we're being optimistic, we'll hope for more concerts or ones in locations beyond London too.

*** For more about the Game Music Festival, head to gmfest.com**

DEBATE

What do we want from this summer's showcases?

This summer could be a hot one for game news, and the team have their wishlists ready

MILFORD COPPOCK
MANAGING ART EDITOR

"I WANT TO SEE MORE TRIPLE-A BLOCKBUSTERS FROM SONY'S FIRST-PARTY STUDIOS."

I'm not the first person to say this, but where are the all-singing, all-dancing PS5 exclusives? We're fast approaching the console's fourth birthday and I still feel we haven't had a game that harnesses the untapped potential nestled under its not-so-sleek bodywork. The first-party studios have been particularly quiet, so I'm hoping we see our first glimpse of a Ghost Of Tsushima sequel or footage from Insomniac's Wolverine title. Either way we're well overdue a title that truly pushes PS5. ■

MIRIAM MCDONALD
OPERATIONS EDITOR

"BRING ON SOME FASCINATING INDIES, AND COMMUNITY DISCUSSION."

Recent studio closures have annoyed me enough that I've resolved only to buy indie games for the next year – I'd rather put my money in the hands of people who make games. But, of course, it's the big companies that have the money for marketing, which can make it hard to identify indie gems. Because of that, I'm hoping there's enough side-buzz in and around all the showcases to highlight projects from independent studios as all of us who love games discuss what we're looking forward to and tell each other what we might have missed. ■

Where are the all-singing, all-dancing PlayStation 5 exclusives?

OSCAR TAYLOR-KENT
EDITOR

"I WANT MORE FROM PLAYSTATION, THOUGH THEY NEEDN'T BE CINEMATIC BLOCKBUSTERS."

You won't be surprised to discover that I'm desperately waiting for a firm direction for the future of PlayStation's first-party releases. I'm hoping that by the time you're reading this, a recent State Of Play will have made things clearer, but it's troubling that we're so deep into the PS5 generation and don't really have any idea which of the console's games will go down as true exclusives given it took so long to move beyond PS4. I'm worried that by the time we get there, they'll be cross-gen with PS6! And yet, calling for The Last Of Us Part III, Uncharted, or more Marvel games feels a bit trite – I want the return of classics that could do better to fill release schedule gaps. Smaller, quirky. What's the new Ape Escape? Tokyo Jungle? And who last saw Astro Bot? Not every release has to be a blockbuster. ■

JESSICA KINGHORN
GAMES EDITOR

"LET'S KEEP ROLLING, ROLLING, ROLE PLAYING."

There are already too few hours in the day – and I'm desperate to fill it up to the rafters with RPGs. Here's hoping the showcases bring me some more worlds to escape into. At this point I'd settle for an evocative teaser image from Persona 6 (remember P5's striking ball-and-chain line up from years ago?), but I'm holding out hope for news of exciting smaller adventures too. You know me, I need my gothic fantasy fix: crowdfunded spiritual successor to Shadow Hearts Penny Blood has been keeping it low-key the last year, save for PC-exclusive roguelike spinoff Penny Blood: Hellbound, but here's hoping the spooky main quest bursts back onto the scene with bloody gusto (and, hopefully, a publisher). ■

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IN THE MOOD FOR...

Brits

Raise the flag, or maybe just a warm beer, for gaming's best of British

1 EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE

It's nice to get out of the city to visit England's remote rural areas. Except, that is, when some mysterious incident has caused the locals to disappear. The Shropshire setting of this walking sim is a rarity, and despite the sinister occurrences, it *is* a lovely day.

2 TOMB RAIDER

Lara Croft might spend much of her time in Himalayan ruins or Amazonian jungles, but she's as English as tea and chips. Besides, what could be more quintessentially British than a minted aristo heading off to far-flung countries to steal their cultural treasures? Dame Lara is surely one of our greatest exports.

3 STREET FIGHTER 6

In case you'd forgotten that brawler Cammy hails from the UK, Street Fighter 6 places her in a stage that resembles the contents of a West End souvenir shop. There's Big Ben, a double-decker bus, a red phone box, even a gentleman sipping tea. Stereotype much? It's enough to make you want to punch someone.

4 CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE

The SAS has spread its 'who dares wins' mentality all over the military FPS series, with the likes of 'Soap' MacTavish, Captain Price and 'Gaz' Garrick all getting in on the act across various instalments. Point them in the direction of some fictional rogue country and they're ready to do their bit.

5 ZOMBI

Back to the capital we go, to find it overrun by the undead. From tube stations to the Tower Of London (complete with zombie beefeaters with a taste for a different kind of meat) it's a risky way to see the sights. But grab yourself a gun and a cricket bat and you stand half a chance

6 SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE AWAKENED

Fictional British icons given the PlayStation treatment range from King Arthur to James Bond, but if we have to pick just one, it's elementary to go with the great detective. 2023's remake of The Awakened is the latest effort to digitise the deerstalker, keeping the game afoot.

7 BANISHERS: GHOSTS OF NEW EDEN

It may be set in New England rather than the original, but in its 17th-century guise the American colony feels like a home from home. The folk you meet sport a range of regional British accents, as does main character Ruaidhrigh 'Red' Mac Raith, a true Scotsman as well as budding ghostbuster.

8 RESISTANCE: FALL OF MAN

It's grim up north, but that's thanks to an alien invasion in this PS3 FPS. While Resistance can't itself resist the pull of London for its finale, much of what comes before takes place in war-torn York and Manchester. It's nice to see different areas in a game, even if they are falling apart.

9 WATCH DOGS: LEGION

It's London, but not (quite) as we know it in this near-future reimagining. While it takes in tourist landmarks, Ubisoft's hack-'em-up is concerned with surveillance, fascism, and job loss. As a portrayal of modern Britain, then, it may hit closer to home than most.

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

No One Lives Forever
This groovy '60s spy thriller can't decide if it wants to be James Bond or Austin Powers, but has plenty of bulldog spirit either way.

Assassin's Creed 3
Haytham Kenway may sound like a British name created by AI or an American romance novellist, but the chap behind it plays a big part here.

Horace
This platformer about a bowler-hatted android calls back to the quirky humour that characterised early British game development.

Did we miss your bestest Brit? Got a spiffing In The Mood For idea? Show and tell at **twitter.com/PLAYgamingmag**

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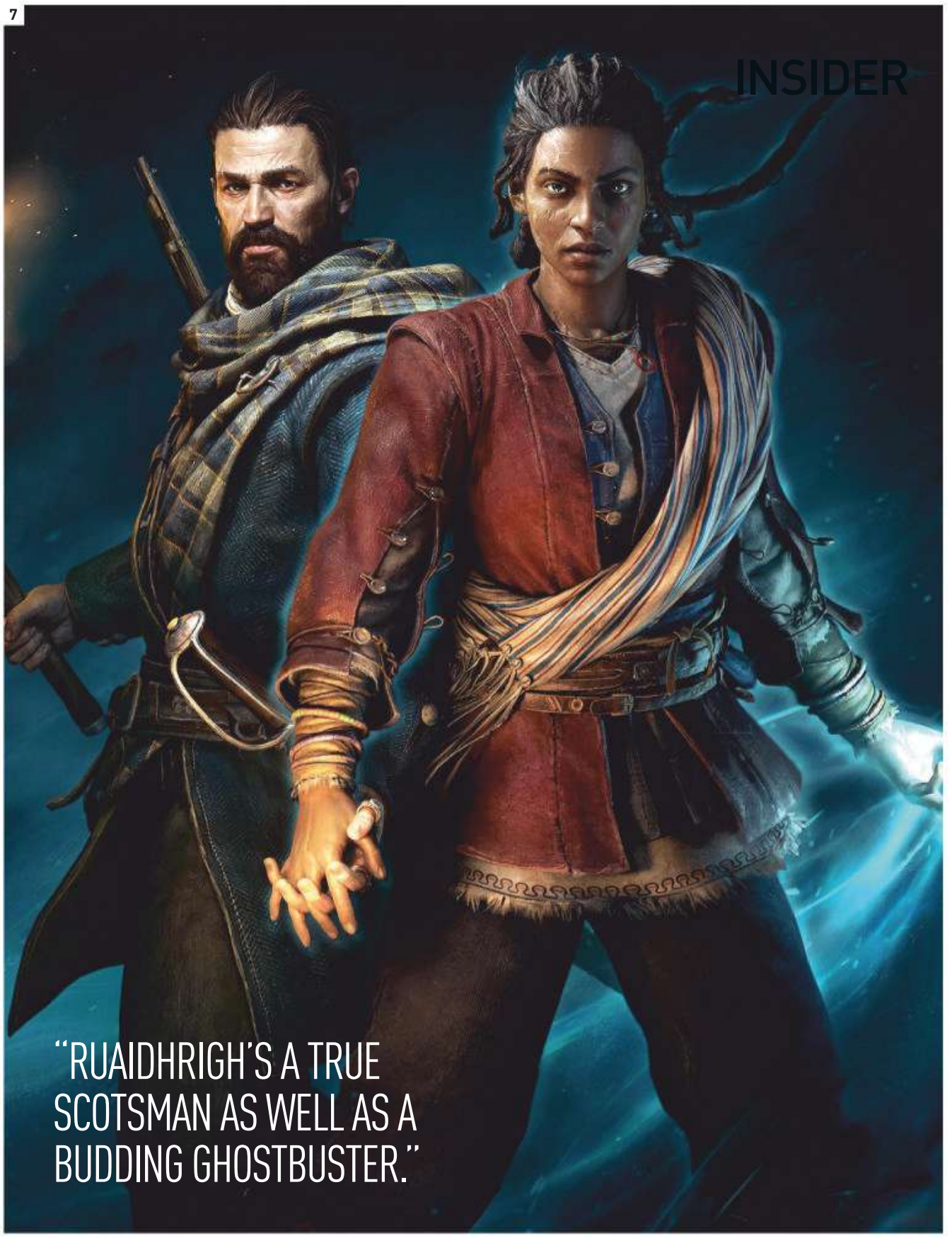

"RUAIDHRIGH'S A TRUE SCOTSMAN AS WELL AS A BUDDING GHOSTBUSTER."

8

9

OPINION

"ALLY OR GENUINE VILLAIN? GAMES NEED MORE MAJOR PLAYERS LIKE RAPHAEL."

How Baldur's Gate 3's player choice reframes your allies the right way

WRITER BIO
From aspiring to be a hero in her youth to making a pact with the devil, Emma Withington's outlook has changed over time.

After my first encounter with Raphael, when he briefly whisks you off to a lavish dinner spread laid out in his House Of Hope, I was enthralled. He unexpectedly set up camp in my brain, worming his way in like my Tav's tadpole. I also didn't expect to explore morality with such breadth via one NPC – let alone the rest of the game.

While there are obvious overarching story limitations in Baldur's Gate 3, very few things are off-limits in terms of how you engage in various relationships with your companions and beyond. Exploring relationships with villainous characters in-depth is especially challenging to balance, with many game narratives leaning toward binary good or evil choices – or a predetermined result. But here, a teamup with the devil is just as viable an option as getting jiggy with a mind flayer for protection.

I haven't felt as conflicted about my choice of allies since The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, which paints the world in all conceivable shades of grey with very few obvious good and evil routes to frame your experience. There the main outcome is determined by your relationship with Ciri, rather than your standing within the world. Of course, with a named protagonist there's only so much room for personal development, which is where Baldur's Gate 3 takes these ideas a step further.

Don't let the frilly collar and lack of horns fool you, Raphael is literally the devil.

DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

Raphael is what he is, unashamedly so, and in his own words can be either adversary or ally. As Larian is fond of reminding us, he is 'literally a devil', so he's clearly not up to anything good, but he becomes the 'devil you know' over the course of the game, offering plenty of interesting moral dilemmas. Raphael can really help you out, or be one of the hardest and most memorable boss fights in the game, and both feel just as valid depending on the way you want to play.

When the Emperor became exponentially more controlling in Act 3 of the game, Raphael's offer grew more and more tempting. Sure, he wants the Crown Of Karsus for nefarious purposes, but how much does that affect me and my allies if I can save our home? The apparent transparency, distance, and respect he'd shown me made him seem far less intrusive and more like a genuine ally.

Systems that tally up karma can leave your choices feeling inauthentic as you aim for an optimal outcome, so it's refreshing that engaging with Raphael and other dubious figures doesn't automatically divert you down a bad path or lock you out of masses of 'good guy' story stuff. Even with seemingly definitive choices like 'Do we take Raphael's deal?' you have the power to be creative and explore alternatives beyond that binary. Morality throughout Baldur's Gate 3 is based on personal roleplay, and driven by how you approach your relationships; even your companions' alignment can shift.

Life is messy, and Baldur's Gate 3 encapsulates its nuances, demonstrating that a good-aligned outcome doesn't always cast you in the role of the infallible hero. We all make choices in our lives based on circumstance, can change our minds, and friends can become foes. Characters like Raphael show us our lives are Technicolor.

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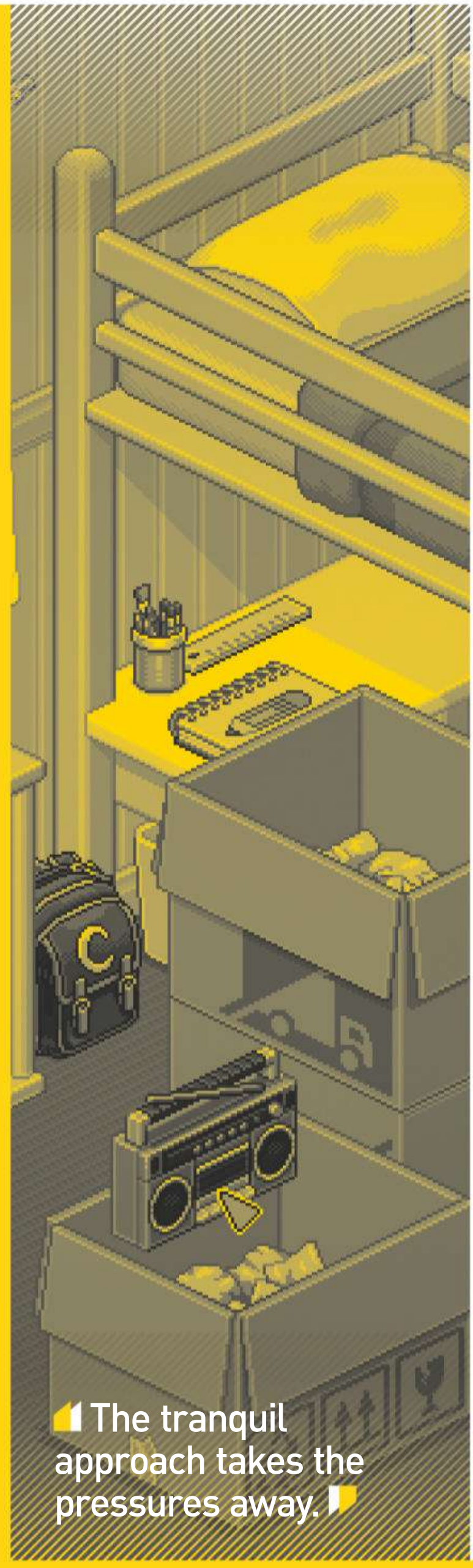

"The tranquil approach takes the pressures away."

OPINION

"EPIC NARRATIVES ARE FINE, BUT WE NEED ROOM TO BREATHE AND DISCOVER."

Unpacking's journey proves that the best stories are hidden in the details

WRITER BIO
Once Vic Pheasey's organised her life as much as she can in reality, she'll fire up the PS5 to do it in-game, too.

Let me be the first to admit that I'm pretty awkward when it comes to the games I enjoy; I'm not one for a space odyssey and I really don't enjoy first-person shooters. I always say I have no patience, but I clearly do given the games I enjoy come out once in a blue moon – cheers to you, Naughty Dog – but still I'll wait patiently for them.

And so waiting for my next triple-A fix led me to look into some of the indie titles on the PS Store. It's just a shame that many aren't as discoverable as the big hitters, when they sometimes convey stronger, more thought-provoking narratives than games from larger studios.

Although I'm late to the party in my discovery, one of my recent favourites is Unpacking; a title that literally does what it claims. What I didn't expect to uncover during the numerous moves, however, was a wondrous story woven among the protagonist's belongings.

LOTS TO UNPACK

Being able to discover the stories of characters I never got to actually play as was a wonderful surprise. As I unpacked pens and notebooks, I could see the person was interested in art. As they moved into other abodes, I could see their interest deepening and seeping into other hobbies. Hanging clothes illustrated their style and hinted at personal relationships, as I struggled to fit another person's items into a quaint apartment. I was also a witness to the breakdown of trysts, noticing the absence of items during the next move. The beauty of Unpacking is that every subtle detail tells a story – even down to a worn-out mouse mat, you can see the history.

It would make life far easier if we could unpack in reality using the DualSense, wouldn't it?

I won't spoil things, just in case you haven't discovered the game yet, but the conclusion leads to a beautifully heart-warming moment after you've continued to piece together this story, simply from emptying boxes.

And this is when I felt that longing for more games like this one. I adored the way the narrative was delicately woven throughout the story; it allowed me to piece it together myself, rather than being slapped round the head with a convoluted backstory and obvious tent poles in order for me to understand its conclusion.

You might think that tidying up someone's gaff in a game and putting things away is as dull as dishwater, but for me, it's incredibly relaxing. As someone whose brain is always firing thoughts around a mile a minute, giving things 'homes' and clearing away does help me when I've got things on my mind, whether it's the good or not-so-good.

Games such as Unpacking, Lake, and countless others are such wonderful tools for maintaining mental health, which is why it surprises me that this relaxed sort of activity doesn't have more of a presence in mainstream gaming. The tranquil approach takes the pressures away that some might feel from other genres, giving you the ability to switch off from reality for a while and really lean into what's happening on screen. And if arranging mugs, or even someone's pants, gives you time to focus on resting for a few hours, then it's a win all round.

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Previews

"SHOOT YOUR BOLT WITH PRECISION."

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Make pals beyond palicos

HIGHLIGHTS

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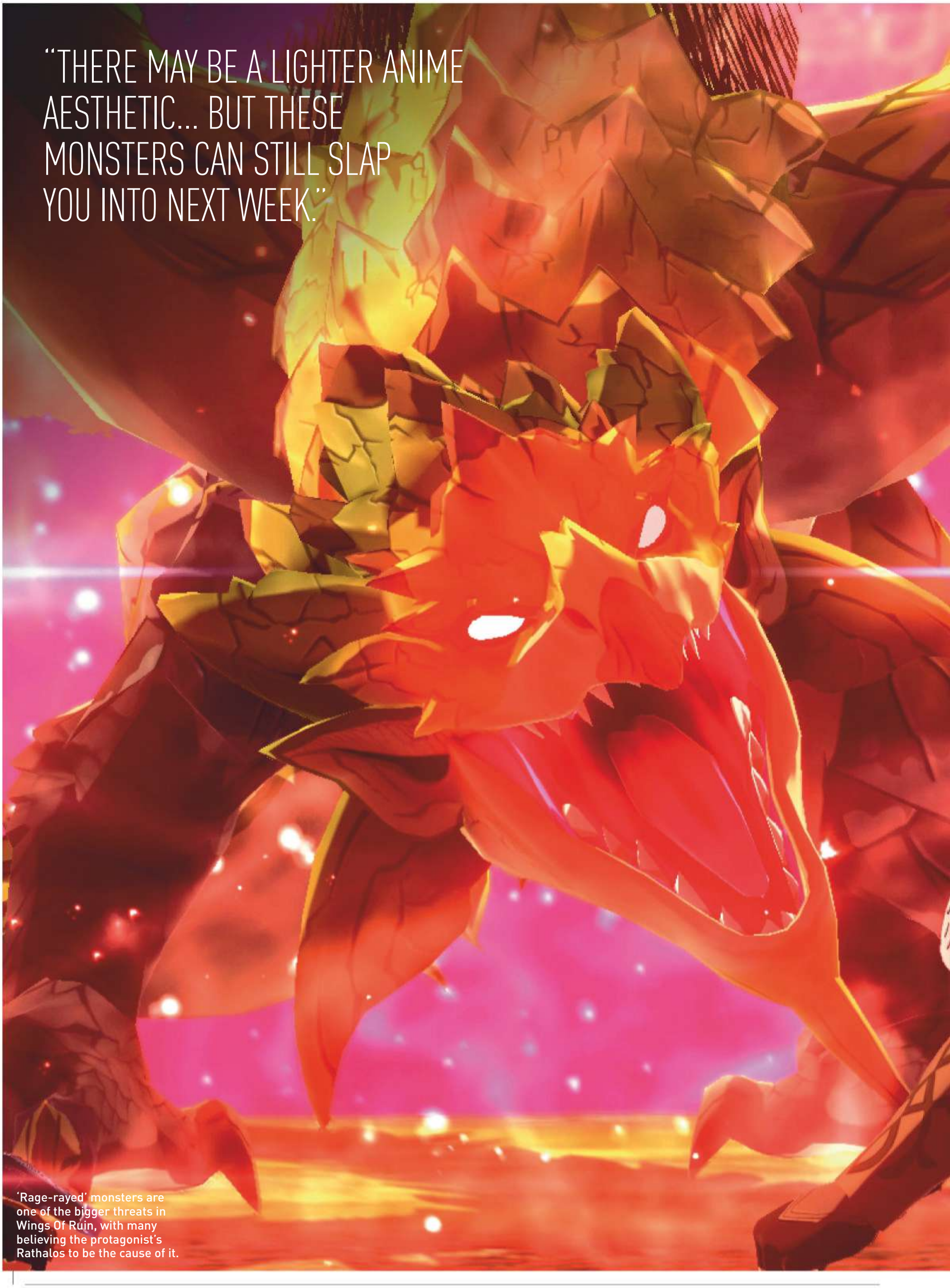


‘Rage-rayed’ monsters are one of the bigger threats in Wings Of Ruin, with many believing the protagonist’s Rathalos to be the cause of it.

FORMAT PS4 / **ETA** 14 JUN / **PUB** CAPCOM
DEV CAPCOM, MARVELOUS / **PLAYERS** 1-4

Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings Of Ruin

The beast-befriending RPG spin-off soars again

To quote a famous line from our sister magazine Edge, in its 1994 review of the then-new Doom: "If only you could talk to these creatures, then perhaps you could try and make friends with them." People scoffed at the idea then, but here we are with Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings Of Ruin, in which you do indeed befriend monsters you would be hunting for their skin and bones in the mainline series.

Taking the form of a story-focussed creature-collecting RPG, this spinoff will be belatedly arriving on PlayStation next month. Its predecessor is coming to the console at the same time, but if you're new to the series and pressed for time, the fact that this is a relatively self-contained story means you can jump straight to Wings Of Ruin, which refines many of the first game's mechanics while including elements from the newer mainline entries, World and Rise.

This interpretation of Monster Hunter may have a lighter anime style than the main games, but make no mistake: its wide range of wyverns, amphibians, carapaceons and many more in the wild remain a dangerous bunch that can slap you into next week. Nonetheless, Stories shows that there are people, such as those in Mahana Village, our young protagonist's home, who view some monsters as guardians they can form bonds with.

FACTRICK

1. CEL OUT?
The first game was criticised for being too cutesy. MHS2 has a more grounded anime presentation.

2. WILD AT HEART
Supposed development reasons mean some large monsters will never become your monstie (boo hiss).

3. KAMURA CHAMELEON
A pre-order bonus includes an outfit for Wyverian companion Ena based on Rise's Kamura maidens.

WHAT'S THE HATCH?

In our hands-on, as we're a rider rather than a hunter, we're given a kinship stone that enables us to form these bonds with monsters. However, we can't just use it on any old beast roaming the wilds. Rather than catch monsters, we've got to scoop them up while they're young. With our big sister and mentor Kayna accompanying us, our first task is to sneak into a monster den where we can steal a monster egg before hightailing it back to the village to hatch it. Using the kinship stone at the moment it hatches, our rider then forms a bond with the newborn monster, who becomes our own little monstie (try not to gag at that portmanteau).

It's not all straightforward, of course. While it's not as arduous as the egg delivery quests in the mainline games, once we're out of the den we still have the misfortune to run into a Kulu-Ya-Ku, clearly not pleased that we're making off with its egg. Fortunately, we also encounter the chatty and chubby felyne Navirou, a returning character from MHS1, who takes it upon himself to become our companion and guide during the game's early monster battles.

These turn-based encounters consist of our rider and their monstie (we start off with the help of a humble

TRACK RECORD Wings Of Ruin is Capcom's second instalment in the Stories subseries. Both games were developed in collaboration with Marvelous, known for its Monster Hunter rival God Eater as well as the Fate/Extella series.

1

Velocidrome), plus potentially another AI-controlled ally, such as Kayna and their monstie, taking on threatening beasts. One difference from other turn-based RPGs is that some turns can be head-to-head when our opponent attacks at the same time as us. This is when the colour-coded attack triangle comes into play; each monster favours a certain type of attack, with power attacks beating technical, technical beating speed, and speed beating power. The depth of the mainline series weapon sets also get a bit of love too, as we find switching to a blunt weapon like a hammer is more effective at breaking the boulder the Kulu-Ya-Ku is shielding itself with.

While this is all well and good if the monster is coming at our rider, we don't have direct control over what our monstie does – at least, not initially. But as we win head-to-heads our kinship gauge fills. It fills up even more if we perform a double attack with our monstie by targeting the same enemy with the same type of attack. We can then spend that gauge to select our monstie's next attack, or wait until it's at max, when two becomes one as we ride our monstie into battle and unleash even more powerful attacks. This is also a great backup because if we get hit while riding, losing all HP only knocks us off our monstie instead of completely knocking us out.

WINNING COMBINATION

While different in focus from the mainline games, Stories does feature elements from those, meaning Monster Hunter fans will get up to speed more quickly than complete newcomers. For instance, you still acquire monster parts from those you've defeated that you can then use to craft better gear. Stories does include some more dated elements, though, so expect a bit of back-and-forth to a village hub's quest board, as well as pre-World item crafting combinations (make sure you save those herbs and blue mushrooms).

Nonetheless, if you've always wanted Monster Hunter to offer a bit more of a structured story and a warmer heart, Wings Of Ruin is an RPG adventure that has both in spades.

IMPRESSIONS

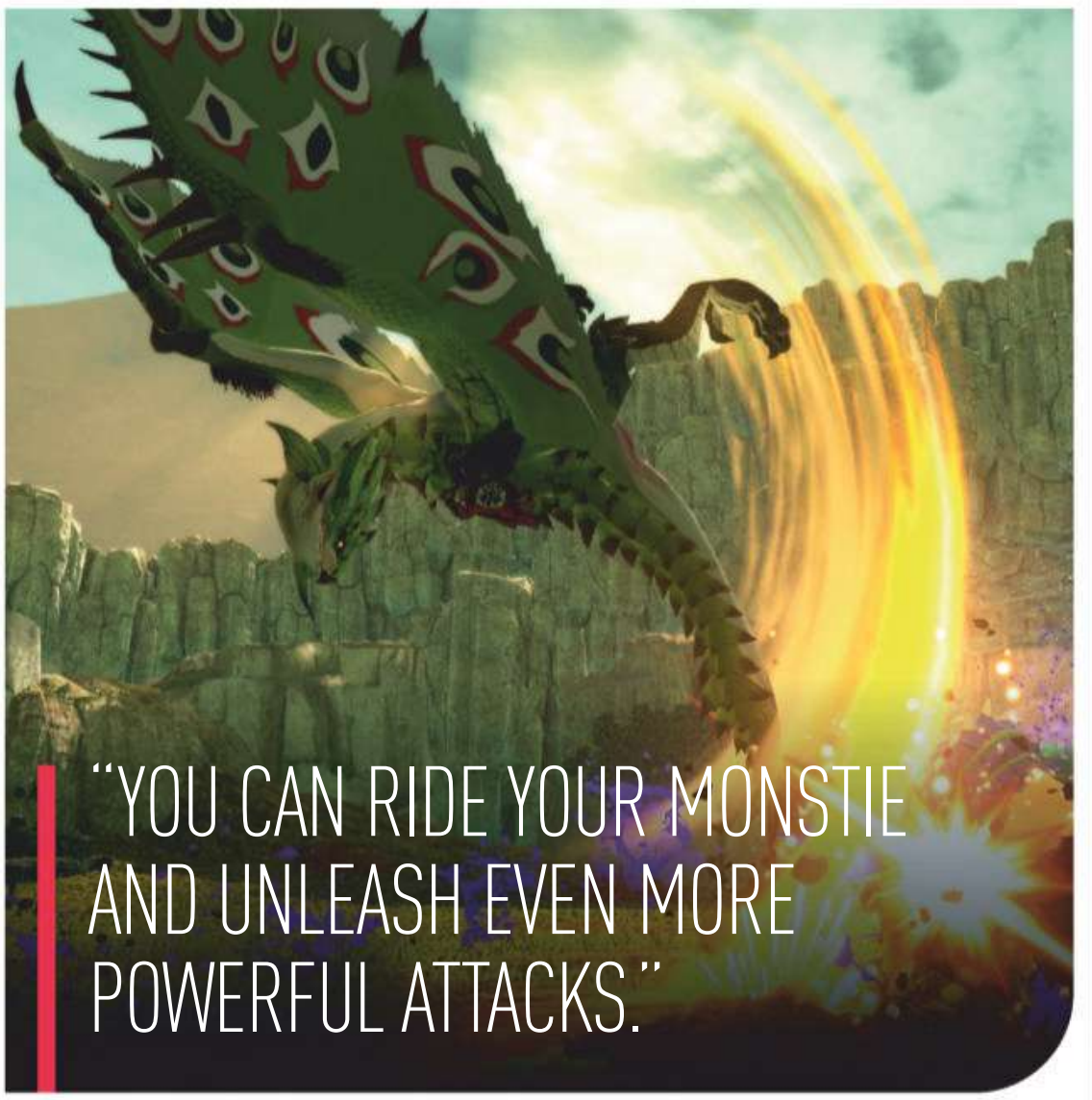
This spin-off is a refreshing switchup of the usual hunts, with deep battling and hatching mechanics that are all its own. Exploring a world map is a breath of fresh air – at least until Wilds arrives.

2

3

1 This game features newer monsters, such as the Anjanath introduced in Monster Hunter World, than previous game MHS1. 2 Find a den decorated in gold and you're bound to scoop up a rare egg. 3 You could call cat-like Navirou the Morgana of Monster Hunter Stories, though they're a tad more annoying. 4 Just like the main series, there's a deep post-game adventure with high-level monsters like Kirin.

Rise's palamutes are here too, though they're less appealing when you've got dragons for buddies.



"YOU CAN RIDE YOUR MONSTIE AND UNLEASH EVEN MORE POWERFUL ATTACKS."

Friends or felynes

A glimpse of the races you'll meet

01

Hunters believe the only good monster is a dead monster, so it's not going to surprise you to learn that they're not very trusting of rider culture.

02

Wyverians are like the elves of Monster Hunter: secretive, with a deep knowledge of the world and a totally different perspective to humans.

03

Felynes exist in different forms, though the most popular ones are palicos, who dutifully serve their hunters – Tsukino's a particularly faithful example.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 2024 / **PUB** ARMOR GAMES STUDIOS / **DEV** SEED BY SEED / **PLAYERS** 1-4

Baladins

A cutesy fantasy adventure awaits

Ever found the rules and long playing time of tabletop RPGs intimidating? Then Baladins might be for you. It's a lightweight fantasy RPG whose developers have taken the more daunting parts of the Dungeons & Dragons rulebook and simplified them into the game's core components. The result is a more approachable tabletop-style RPG that doesn't take itself too seriously, making it perfect for newbies and those who want a short but fun fantasy adventure.

Baladins begins in classic RPG fashion. You and up to three other players each pick an adventurer from a handful of classes, a roster that feels more whimsical than your usual goth rogues and bearded wizards. There's the graceful Dancer, the mischievous Pyro, the inquisitive Luxomancer, the cutesy Cook, and, finally, the Bard. Are you even playing a fantasy RPG if there's no bard?

The story setup is that you're a member of a guild of entertainers which is sworn to serve the people of Gatherac through dance, song, cooking, stunts – whatever inspires amusement and whimsy. For the game's first in-game week, you're tasked with preparing for the upcoming Peace Festival (essentially a breezy tutorial), but when the event kicks off it awakens a grumpy, ancient dragon who casts you back in time to the beginning of the week. Now stuck in a time loop, your adventuring rabble needs to break free from the cycle.

To stop this time-eating dragon, your party needs to venture out into Baladins' world, making choices and seeing what happens with a roll of the dice. A big part of Baladins' charm is its toybox world, a colourful boardgame-inspired map stuffed with miniatures and figures. During your turn, you can click on the map and your character will scamper to that destination, like you're actually moving paper cutouts of your character on a physical board.

FACTRICK

1. CROWD PLEASER

To secure funds, Seed By Seed launched a Kickstarter in 2022 – and smashed its target.

2. MIMIC CHEST

Inspirations include multiplayer comedy dating sim Monster Prom and the Paper Mario games.

3. LORE CHECK

Many of the fantasy folk have been taken from French folklore, including lutins, a type of hobgoblin.

LAWFUL GOOD

While at a location you have a small handful of action points to spend on activities including speaking to people, looking at the shops, and taking part in events. Your character's preset abilities will play into skill checks, so you might pass a creative skill check and spend the night cooking delicious meals at a tavern to earn more gold, or fail a performance check with a singing ogress and miss an opportunity to become besties with her. There aren't really 'good' and 'bad' rolls, and the game's distinct from traditional RPGs in that there's no combat, bosses, or levelling up. It's all fairly light and cutesy with no real challenge or risk, and the story is written in such a way that you'll get caught up in the same silly shenanigans as you would in Dungeons & Dragons (undoubtedly the best part of playing D&D).

"BEING CAUGHT UP IN FANTASY ANTICS IS MORE FUN WITH FRIENDS."

Being involved in fantasy antics is more fun with friends, and Baladins lets you play with others both online and locally. There are lots of stories in the world, so there are opportunities for you all to go on separate endeavours, but Baladins does a great job of initiating co-operation between players. If you travel together you can combine the characters' skill points and dice rolls when making skill checks, and quests get solved faster when multiple people work together. There are also occasions when the whole group must make a decision together, structured through a voting system. In this way, Baladins is great at spurring on co-op play and natural communication (and perhaps the odd argument).

If you're hoping for an in-depth fantasy story and systems, we'd recommend looking elsewhere (Baladins' art style alone should indicate that). Seed By Seed has created a lighthearted RPG with a campaign that's so short it can played in a handful of evenings. But that also makes it ripe for replay to see if you get some new results. Some variation in quests would be a great addition (the preview we play mainly focusses on fetch quests), but other than that Baladins feels like it's going to nestle itself nicely into a gaming group's evening schedule.

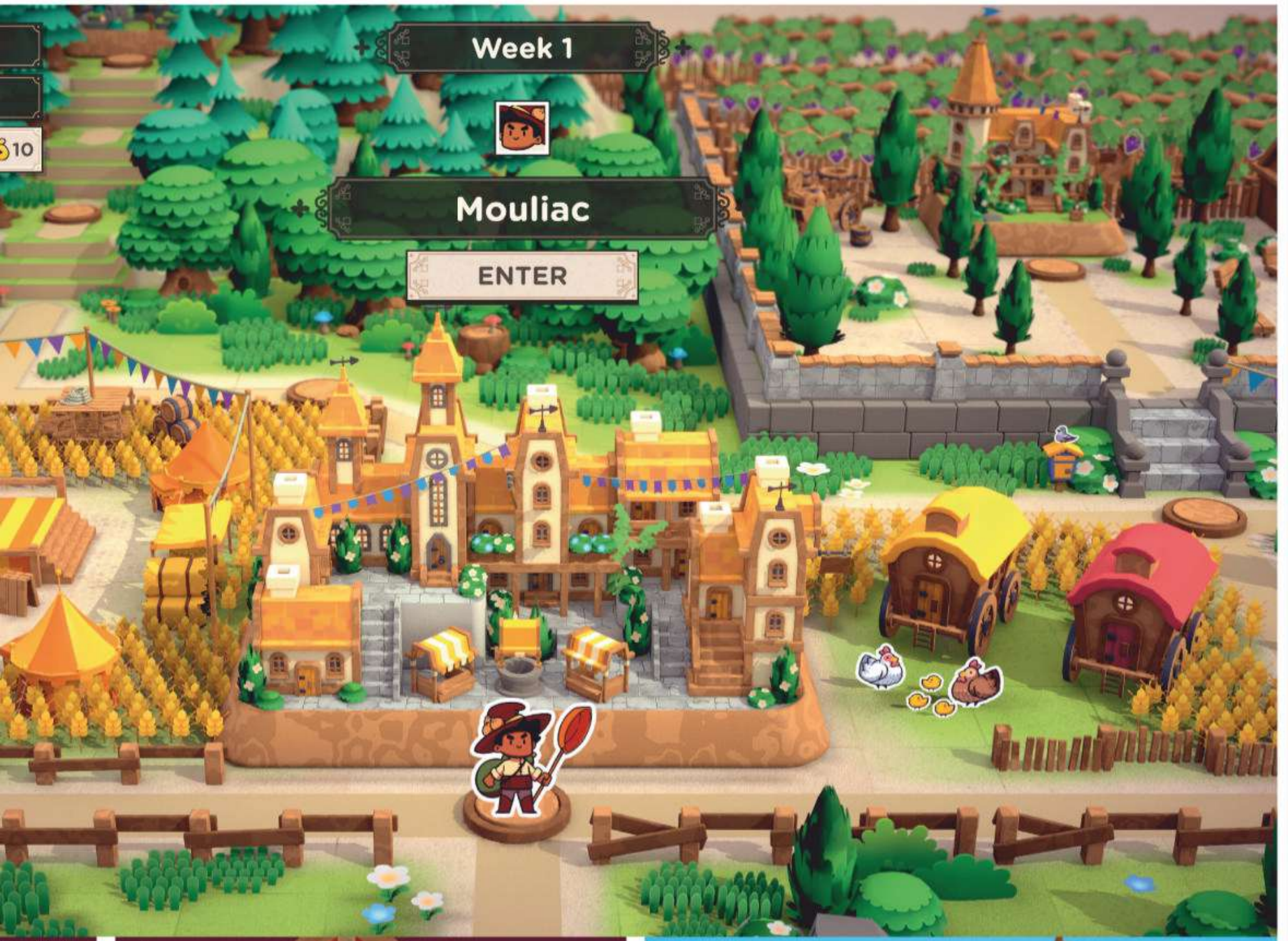
IMPRESSIONS

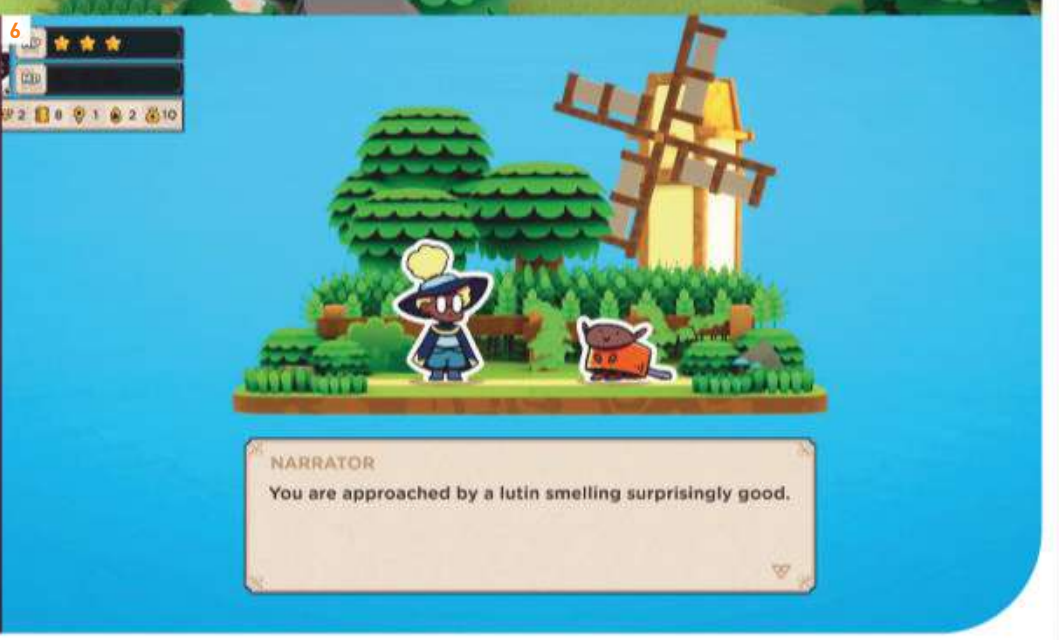
A fun gateway into the world of epic fantasy RPGs and tabletop gaming. Its focus on co-op play and cutesy art style make it approachable for newbies and refreshingly lightweight for genre fans.

TRACK RECORD Baladins is Seed By Seed's second game, and its first to come to PlayStation. The studio's debut, PC title Pile Up!, is a platformer about cardboard boxes and is similar to Baladins in that it's a co-op, it's colourful, and incredibly cute.

4 Baladins' fantasy world is a charming mix of 3D environments and 2D characters. 5 The Bard has been a recent addition to the Baladins class roster. 6 We don't know what a lutin would smell like but we imagine this one would smell like a freshly baked cinnamon bun.

1 Dice rolls, together with your party's combined abilities, will determine the outcomes of events. 2 There are monsters in Baladins, but there's never any combat, so you'll have to get creative with how to settle a conflict. 3 Pit stops on your journey will offer opportunities to increase your skills which include: strength, finesse, creativity, knowledge, and destruction.





FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** SUMMER 2024
PUB PONCLE / **DEV** PONCLE / **PLAYERS** 1-4

Vampire Survivors

Welcome to bite club

Hell's the hottest spot for all that goes bump in the night – but it's kicking out time at the bar and the devils have nowhere to go save your back garden in rural Italy. The horde's drink of choice? Oh, that's *all* you.

Thankfully, you're far from defenceless in this roguelike shoot-'em-up. You attack automatically, leaving you to focus on cutting a path through the throng of oh-so-bitey foes. You start the fight with one character-specific attack, which can be anything from straightforward whips and blades to less predictable weapons such as splashes of holy water and rippling waves of lightning. Cutting through weaker beasties, the way forward is paved in shiny gems. You won't level up without scooping up fistfuls of these jewels, but enemies from bats and zombies to golems, manticores, and even undead sassy witches ensure hoovering up those stones is easier said than done.

FACTRICK

1. ONE MAN BAND

Vampire Survivors started its impressive unlife as a solo developer project by Luca Galante in 2020.

2. ARMY OF THE DEAD

Over the past few years, as the game became a success, development studio Poncle has grown to a team of 15.

3. ONCE BITTEN

Despite the name of the game, vampires do not make an appearance as enemies. Our Jess is *gutted*.

RAINING BLOOD

Duck and weave well enough to crunch a mouthful of crystals and you'll have the option to add one of a few more strings to your bow. These range from passive items like spinach (which increases your base damage by 10%, Popeye-style) to what amounts to an impressive armoury.

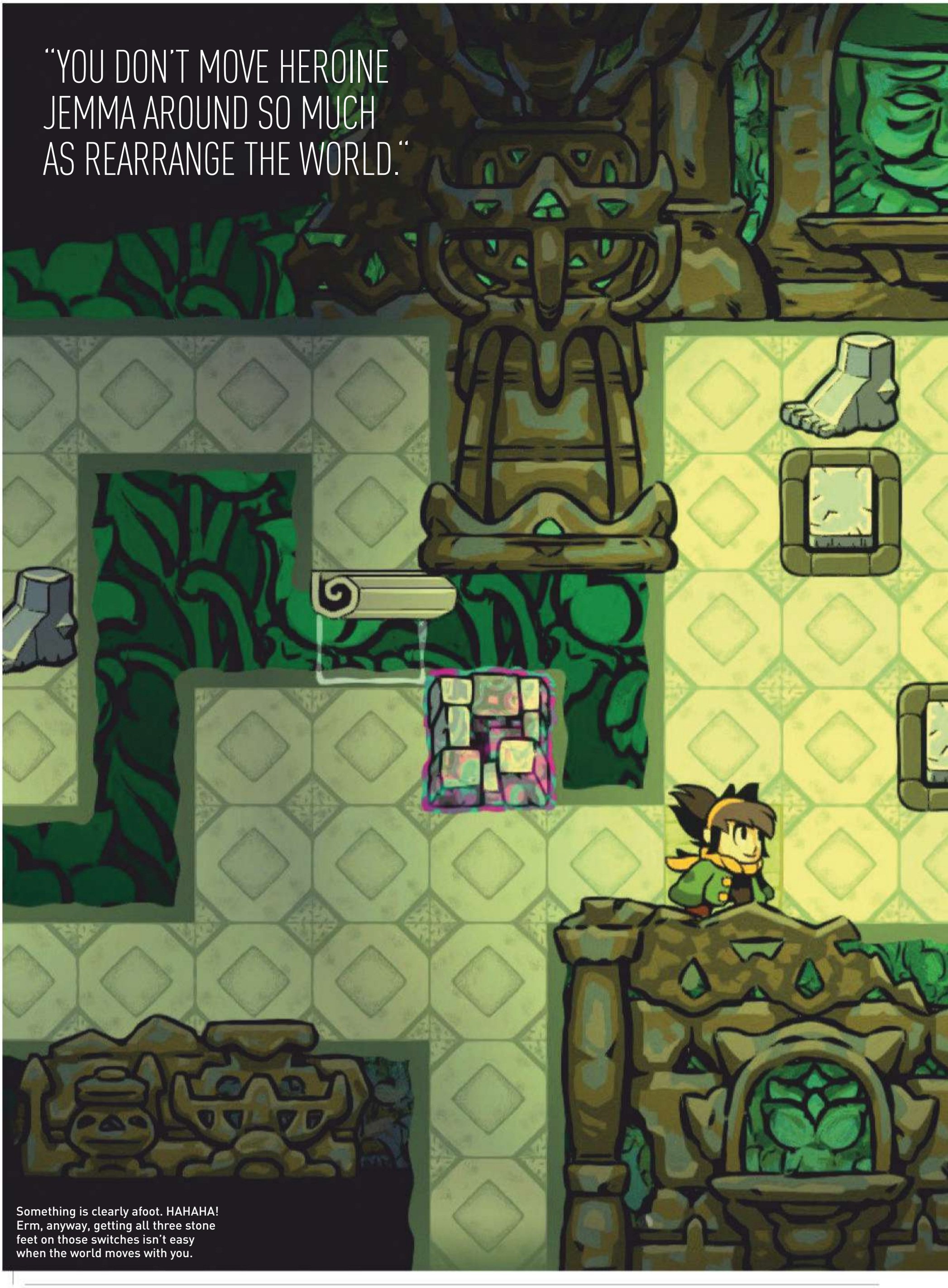
Spellcaster Imelda Belpaese was our main for a long time as her magical projectiles target the closest enemies and pair well with a wealth of unlockable weapons. However, we recently discovered Vampire Survivors' most truly overpowered character: Poe Ratcho. This older gent starts with a humble bulb of garlic, its aroma keeping low-level lowlifes at arm's reach. Upgrades extend this weapon's area of effect, increase the offensiveness of its stench, and more. Equipping the lightning ring in conjunction with a fully sprouted bulb of garlic makes for monster slaying ASMR; each enemy vanquished makes a satisfying 'pop!', forming a chorus that sounds like a rainstorm. All that goes bump in the night won't know what hit it.

IMPRESSIONS

Simple but effective, this roguelike offers plenty of bite. A delicious popcorn loop of 'just one more run,' served through a wealth of unlockable characters, weapons, maps, and more. We're hoping the PlayStation version makes good use of the DualSense's haptics.

TRACK RECORD Many of our colleagues at PLAY Towers have already lost hours to Poncle's compelling debut, as it first launched on PC in 2022.

PREVIEW



Something is clearly afoot. HAHAHA! Erm, anyway, getting all three stone feet on those switches isn't easy when the world moves with you.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2024 / **PUB** FURNITURE & MATTRESS
DEV FURNITURE & MATTRESS / **PLAYERS** 1

Arranger

What do you want to know? Axis anything

Have you ever wished for a videogame based on a lattice pie crust? Us too! Well now, our dreams are coming true; sort of. This is a game world made up of interconnected horizontal and vertical lines, which you push and pull like tabs in a pop-up book. Only rather than popping up, things slide up, down, or across.

As much as we enjoy talking about delicious pies, and thinking about delicious pies, and *eating* delicious pies, perhaps a crossword puzzle would be a more suitable thing to compare this to. Arranger is a puzzle adventure, after all, and it's important to note that the aforementioned lines which make up the world are split into squares. You don't move our heroine Jemma around, you see, so much as rearrange the world in which she exists.

We get a tasty slice of the experience (sorry, we're still thinking about pies) via a demo of the opening section of the game. Jemma is moving away from home, a pleasant but uneventful town that, it would seem, ill prepares her for the challenges presented by the wider world. Our first task, as requested by our adoptive mother, is to find somewhere to store all of the junk that we're not taking with us. For some reason this needs to be in a completely different building despite fitting into a single box, but hey, any excuse to venture out into town for adventuring.

Movement, which we get a (very) brief taste of in the prologue prior to our storage-seeking adventure, drives the entire experience from start to finish. You could hink of Arranger's world as a giant chessboard, where you can move one square at a time, but only vertically or horizontally. There are two important twists to this. First, if you move out of bounds, you will instantly appear on the other side of the 'board', which is useful for getting past obstacles. Second, every time you move vertically or horizontally, everything on the same strip of game world as you on that axis moves as well.

FACTRICK

1. TOON IN

As well as Braid, David Hellman has drawn webcomics, and the graphic novel Second Quest.

2. EXIT STRATEGY

One setting will allow you to skip puzzles via an optional square on the 'board' for when you'd rather move on.

3. TIMELY EXPLANATION

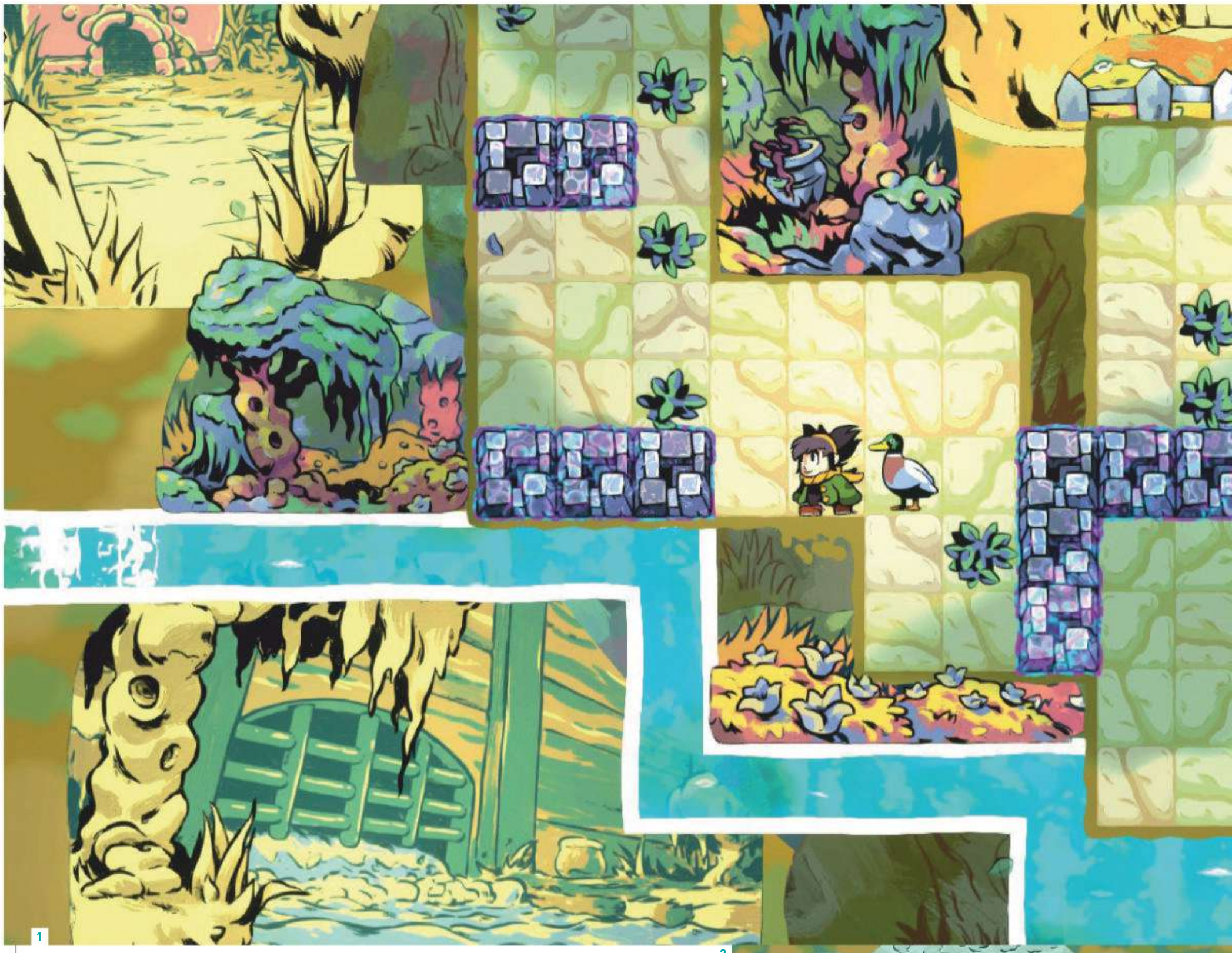
Furniture & Mattress estimates that Arranger will take a good eight to ten hours to complete.

HOME ON ARRANGE

There are exceptions – buildings that straddle axes won't move, nor will switches or certain objects that stay stubbornly in your way – but *almost* everything will. This means that you need to strategically navigate your way around and then beside anybody you want to talk to, and even anything that you want to use. You also can't pick anything up, you're only able to push things around.

Finding somewhere to keep all the stuff we're leaving behind, therefore, becomes a thought-provoking challenge rather than a chore. We're shifting Jemma around like a square in one of those fiddly little Christmas cracker puzzles, only without the frustration. We carefully move her around blocks and other obstacles, and get her close

TRACK RECORD Arranger will be the first game from the wonderfully named Furniture & Mattress, but the team include writer/producer Nick Suttner (Celeste, Guacamelee! 2) and the artist David Hellman (Braid).



1

» to chatty NPCs without shoving them too far away to interact with.

There's no HP to worry about and no fail states (at least, not in our demo), but there *are* occasional enemies. Defeating each one is a simple case of pushing a sword into their face, but getting a sword to where we want it is rarely quite so simple. This is especially true when we start to encounter pressure switches that need to be active in order for us to reach the enemy. It's immediately obvious that we need to get that big stone foot to stay on the switch while we get the sword to our foe, but how do we do that in a cramped space when, every time we move, the whole vertical or horizontal slice of ground moves in the same direction? Hmm.

SLIDE QUEST

There are lots of great little puzzles packed into the demo, but one in particular stands out as the perfect example of the sort of thing the game is going for. Right near the end, we encounter a door that will only open when three bells are rung at once – and one of the bells is broken.

Returning to town we rescue a cat who, wouldn't you know it, is wearing a jingly little bell on its collar. How convenient! With the cat rescued (via some further monster mashing), we then manoeuvre the cheery little moggy back through town and into the room with the door. We carefully arrange the cat and the two bells so that they're all sitting on the same horizontal line, take a step to the side, and bingo – we've got three bells ringing simultaneously, and one door opening.

There's even a boss fight in which we need to coax a large worm-like monster out to its full length to get it to reveal its head, and *then* kick a sword into its face. Three times (of course). It's a neat idea, and hopefully a sign of the clever chin-stroking to come rather than something that'll be reused.

We've seen masses of invention and charm in what we've played so far, but we're confident that we've seen just a fraction of the ideas Arranger will have to offer challenge-hungry players once it's fully cooked. (Ah, sorry, we're thinking about pies again.)

IMPRESSIONS

Gripped in seconds, we are sad to see our demo end. A unique yet intuitive premise, witty writing, wonderful art, and smart puzzles have us eager to see the whole arrangement.

2

3

1 This duck must have noble blood running in his veins, because he should be addressed as m'allard. 2 Who's the giant chap above the gate? Whoever he is, we like his hat. 3 Whatever is going on here (is the lady amazed by his buttocks?), it becomes important after the events of the demo... 4 Thanks for sitting on the switch for us, Mr Mayor! Not that you had a choice as we moved the literal ground you stand on.

Jemma's always got a smile on her face, even (especially?) when she's killing a monster.

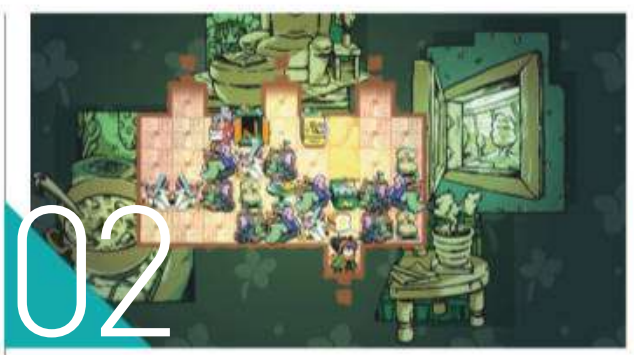
"THERE'S NO HP AND NO FAIL STATES, BUT THERE *ARE* OCCASIONAL ENEMIES."

This is my Jemma

The beginnings (and continuings) of our world-shifting heroine

01

A tearful mother leaves her baby at the entrance to a town. But why abandon it? Who is she? We have a feeling we'll find out... eventually, anyway.



02

All grown up, Jemma is now ready to leave the little town and forge her own way in life. She's alarmingly messy; let's hope that changes sharpish.

03

After more trouble than you'd expect, Jemma finds a storage space for her belongings, and is now *almost* set to leave. There's a boss fight in her future...

There's a kinetic energy to the combat despite its turn-based nature, with satisfying animations.

FORMAT TBC / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** RAW FURY / **DEV** GROUND SHATTER / **PLAYERS** 1

Knights In Tight Spaces

Saturday's Knights all right for fighting. And Sunday's. And Monday's...

Look, if you want to make lurid jokes about medieval romantic encounters, that's up to you; we're here to talk about a videogame. Specifically, the spiritual successor to deckbuilding brawler Fights In Tight Spaces (there's a clue in the name that you may have picked up on). If you know it, much will be familiar here – with a few significant twists.

The basics remain the same. It's still turn-based combat, the spaces are indeed still very tight, and you still build a deck of virtual cards that are used for attack, defence, and even movement. It's not, therefore, taking a traditional approach to card games. This is much less poker and more poking people with swords; less snap, more snapping necks.

The demo we play offers only a bite-sized teaser of the full experience, but it's more than enough to appreciate how much KITS has inherited from FITS while growing into its own. The art is an immediate indication of this, the violent silhouettes of the last game replaced by detailed, comic-book-style line drawings.

FACTRICK

1. CARD WORK

KITS will feature a total of 300 cards to choose from. Not all at once – that would be a knightmare.

2. COMBO HARVESTER

With multiple friendlies squeezed onto the board, some of the abilities will offer team-up opportunities.

3. FRIENDLY FIRE

There *is* a story lurking behind all this, and you'll want to pick who you team up with carefully...

SPACE YOURSELF

Rather than different starting decks, here you choose between different character classes at the beginning of your run (the demo has two, though it seems the final product will feature several more). Each class offers unique attributes, and some cards can only be played by their associated classes.

You can recruit more characters to your cause during a run, meaning that you can (and will) have more than one character at a time – *but* those class restrictions combined with the RNG mean that you can never guarantee what each character will be able to do on the next turn. We learn this the hard way when one turn gives us almost an entire hand of ranged attack cards for our archer, leaving our brawler with nothing but a generic Block card to use.

A chess-like focus on thinking multiple steps ahead is key to success. The aforementioned archer can only shoot in a straight line, for example, and only when there's at least one empty square between them and their target. Some cards will also move your character forwards or backwards a set number of spaces while attacking, and if you don't have the spaces available to move into, you can't play that card. Add in a limited number of points to spend on card uses per turn, and there's lots to juggle.

IMPRESSIONS

Somewhat ironically, the fairly brief demo doesn't allow the mechanics enough space to shine, but what we've played so far has us hopeful that a good knight can be had by all. Bring it, sir!

TRACK RECORD Ground Shatter is best known for this game's precursor, Fights In Tight Spaces, but it also developed action-movie-inspired first-person shooter RICO and platform brawler SkyScrappers. A fairly brief but admirably varied résumé.

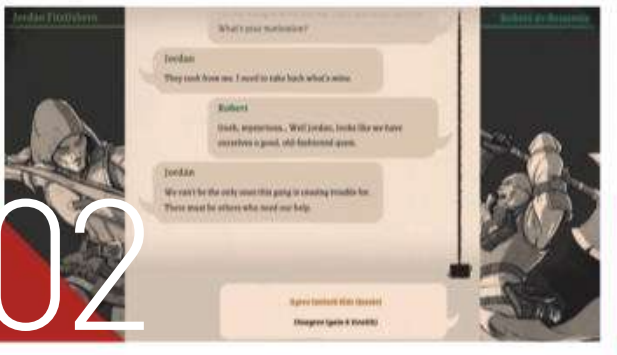
1 We told you ye olde spaces were tight. Not enough room to swynge a catte. 2 As you progress through a run's map, you'll be able to buy and upgrade cards. 3 Wait, is that... a knuckle duster? 4 There's magic afoot too. We enjoy throwing the odd fireball.

A hard knight's day

Adventure time! C'mon, grab your friends

01

First, pick your fighter! Such as, er, the Fighter. Each character offers unique advantages and disadvantages for a run, as well as their own deck.



02

Now, off you go to be heroic. The story told between fights will allow you to make choices which can unlock characters or restore health.

03

The fun bit: chopping people up! The camera offers a far-off isometric view, but will zoom in for a kill or a good hit so you get to enjoy the details.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 18 JUN / **PUB** SECRET MODE / **DEV** THE CHINESE ROOM / **PLAYERS** 1

Still Wakes The Deep

Wakey wakey, rise and die

Creepy mansions are great settings for horror, but when you think about it, oil rigs are even better suited to it. It's surprising that they're not used more often: a rig is a huge but claustrophobic industrial complex in the middle of the sea, many miles from land, with little means of escape. In short, it's not where you want to be if something goes wrong. And something goes *very* wrong here.

We're still not sure precisely what that something is, but thanks to an extended look at an early section of gameplay, we now have a clearer picture than ever before of what's going on. Still Wakes The Deep takes place on the Beira D oil rig off the coast of Scotland in 1975. The Beira D is fictional, but painstaking research has gone into making the setting as true to life as possible.

We're not even ten seconds into our walkthrough before it's made clear that the environment is harsh even *without* the supernatural goings-on. Protagonist Caz warms himself with a heater, and on-screen messaging makes clear this is a mechanic that will factor into play as we progress. Maybe all that running from unearthly beasties will keep Caz warm?

There *will* be running, as Caz has no way to defend himself, and we can't help but note that at one point the developers mention "horrors". Plural. There are a few Christmas trees standing in the section we see, but we very much doubt it's Father Christmas and his elves running around; the brief glimpse of… *something* we do get in the final moments of our walkthrough certainly doesn't look very jolly.

FACTRICK

1. STORIED CAREER

Want to explore a horrific oil rig without the fear of dying? Story Mode will allow you to do that.

2. OIL GO

Depending on location and rig type, workers will live on the oil rig for weeks or months at a time.

3. SOUNDS SCARY

The composer is Jason Graves, who has worked previously on horror games Dead Space and Until Dawn.

IT'S RIGGED

The already somewhat grim-looking interior of a 1970s oil rig isn't made much more welcoming by the damage it has recieved, and certainly not by the icky, fleshy growths that a mysterious 'Incident' has wrought upon the metal structure. The atmosphere on board is somewhat tense even without the controller in our hands, and when a fellow survivor is found, we don't feel all that confident that he'll still be alive by the time the credits roll.

One thing we're curious about, and which currently remains unclear, is how heavily the narrative will lean into the working-class nature of the oil drilling jobs and the people who do them. The aforementioned survivor suggests asking their boss for help escaping, and Caz immediately scoffs at the idea. He says words to the effect of, "He'd still have us working if we were at the bottom of the North Sea," although with somewhat more colourful language.

Perhaps he was just in a bad mood. After all, just a few minutes before, he'd seen – well, *heard* – his best friend, Trots, die. Hearing Trots' yells for mercy and agonised screams from behind a locked door, offering no clue as to the horror he's facing save for a white light blazing just beyond, Caz rather optimistically asks, "What's up wee man, are you hurt?" just before the arrival of a loud and very definitive squelching sound. Caz then indulges in a bit of light blaspheming before finding something else to do.

Now, you may be thinking – as you've probably thought when watching or playing a thousand horror games and movies before this – 'why don't they just get out of there?'. Well for one thing, all means of communication with the outside world have been cut off. For another, it seems that every possible exit has been blocked or destroyed by the damage. There's got to be *some* way out though… right? Rigs are generally reached by boat or helicopter, so some means of attracting a sea-based Uber driver is going to have to be found.

> "WE DOUBT IT'S FATHER CHRISTMAS AND HIS ELVES RUNNING AROUND."

The in-game footage we are treated to by the developers is almost ten minutes long, but it feels like just a few when you're experiencing it, caught up in the action, and we can not wait to see more. The attention to detail in the environment is truly impressive, and every sign points to an atmospheric experience that will keep you guessing what's around the next darkened corner (although it's bound to be unpleasantly fleshy).

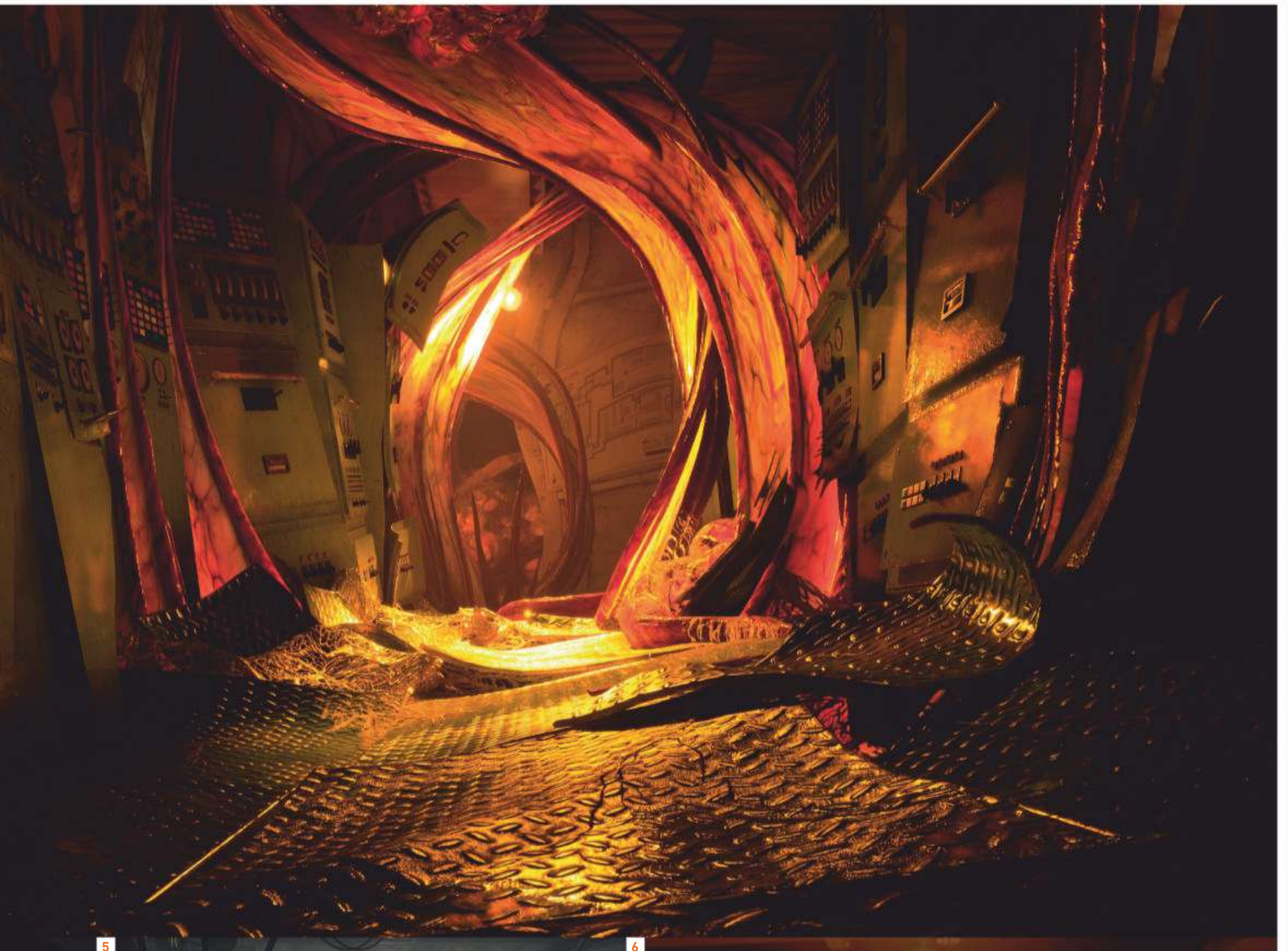
IMPRESSIONS

If the rest of the game lives up to what we've seen so far, Still Wakes The Deep could well end up being one of those memorable games that makes you ask, 'Why hasn't anybody done this before?'

TRACK RECORD The Chinese Room's impressive CV includes indie darling Everybody's Gone To The Rapture, as well as horror heavy hitter Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs, and the upcoming Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2.

4 Our walkthrough takes place at a very early stage of the game, and it seems the damage we see will only get worse. 5 Between the wind, rain, and freezing cold, you won't want to stay outside for too long. 6 Some areas of the rig are flooded. Best hope nothing's in there taking a swim with you.

1 Ah, a switch. Now *this* is something we know how to deal with. 2 A lifeboat! For some reason, we don't think we'll be hopping into one of these within the first hour. 3 You do *not* want to be stuck here. Especially not with a monster who wants your insides outside.



Tales Of The Shire: A The Lord Of The Rings Game

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2024 / **PUB** PRIVATE DIVISION
DEV WETA WORKSHOP / **PLAYERS** ONLINE MULTIPLAYER FEATURES

Nothing quite like feeling the soil between your furry toes, eh? The studio that hand-crafted many a gnarly creature for the film series, Weta Workshop, is turning its creative vision to a cosier corner of Tolkien's Middle-earth. Nestled among the bucolic, rolling hills of Bywater, you'll find a Hobbit hole to call your own. As well as making it feel like home through decoration, you'll need to ensure your pantry stays full through foraging, fishing, and gardening. Bywater offers plenty more to chew on besides, with a landscape that shifts with the seasons as well as friends both fresh-faced and familiar to find out there in the green.

Beyond The Ice Palace 2

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 2024
PUB PQUBE / **DEV** STORYBIRD STUDIO
PLAYERS 1

Who among us *hasn't* tried to steal the prince of the Metroidvania genre Alucard's look? And if you haven't, what's been stopping you? French developer Storybird Studio has even got the walk down. However, there's more to the trials and tribulations of Beyond The Ice Palace 2's frosty protagonist than the influences he wears on his sleeve – metaphorically speaking; the Cursed King is shirtless, and fights with the very chains that once imprisoned him. For another thing, the pixel art is gorgeous beyond mere homage to the greats, and furthermore, this is actually a legacy sequel to a game that predates Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night by a little under a decade. Cool!

That Time I Got Reincarnated As A Slime Isekai Chronicles

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 8 AUG
PUB BANDAI NAMCO ENTERTAINMENT / **DEV** ZOC CO
PLAYERS 1

When salaryman Satoru Mikami is stabbed, he's zapped somewhere far, far away upon death – and gets a radical new look. This side-scrolling action-'em-up based on a series of Japanese light novels is an adaptation of what happens after his gooey rebirth, including both the Goblin's Revenge arc and the Religious Nation arc and containing a new story penned by the original author of the novels. In between throwing down with flashy attacks you'll get to know your monstrous besties, build a place to hang out, and presumably trade tragic backstories.

Potionomics: Masterwork Edition

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** AUTUMN 2024
PUB MARVELOUS EUROPE
DEV VORACIOUS GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

Sylvia has a problem: her uncle owed a massive debt to a fearsome witch, and as he's now kicked, er, the cauldron, she's inherited it. To the dearly departed's credit, he did also leave Sylvia his potion shop... though that's now at risk of getting repossessed. To battle her way back into the black, skint Sylvia's got to brew up a storm. In addition to selling her wares and running the shop, she's set her sights on winning a potion-brewing competition boasting a sizeable cash prize. Featuring charming, expressive animation, a pair of cat pirates, and a surprising side-order of romance, we can't wait to put our game faces on for this magical management title.

SunnySide

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 10 JUL
PUB MERGE GAMES
DEV RAINYGAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

Just this once, the grass really *is* greener, and we're keeping the cosy vibes coming with this farming-slash-life simulator set in the Japanese countryside. Upon a humble little plot you can grow and sell your own produce (in addition to the usual suspects, you're able to make soy sauce and tofu), or get out there and forage up a storm for the materials you need to develop your own homestead exactly the way you like it. That said, no-one is an island; you'll get to know a colourful cast of locals (learning all about their lives and maybe even finding love among the lettuces), lose yourself in the idyllic scenery, and find yourself on the other side of that akiya (abandoned) house rabbithole the YouTube algorithm sent you down that one time.

Let's School

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** Q2 2024
PUB PATHEA GAMES, PM STUDIOS
DEV PATHEA GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

From the developer of post-apocalyptic farming sims My Time At Portia and My Time At Sandrock comes the opportunity to build something new. It casts you as a headmaster who wears many caps; you'll do everything from rebuild your run-down school (which you were yourself a pupil at) to construct vaguely sensical timetables, and even make one lucky (or unlucky) club your personal passion project.

It'd all be so perfect were it not for the chaotic element of the students. As headmaster, you must shoulder the responsibility for everything that can, and probably will, go wrong. Bullying? Arson at the school festival? A sudden increase in glasses prescriptions? It's up to you to get to the bottom of it.

Metaphor: ReFantazio

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 11 OCT / **PUB** SEGA
DEV ATLUS / **PLAYERS** 1

From a team boasting devs who have lent their creative energy to Persona and Shin Megami Tensei comes a fresh high-fantasy RPG set in a weird and wonderful world. The king is dead, but the throne won't remain empty, and you play as one of many figures vying for the best seat in the house. You'll work to lift a curse and to unlock the power of Archetypes. Awakening to this power allows you to mix and match skills across various classes, making for a power trip that's distinctly your own.

SteamWorld Heist II

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 8 AUG
PUB THUNDERFUL PUBLISHING
DEV THUNDERFUL DEVELOPMENT
PLAYERS 1

Should you find yourself in a steampunk world, presumably the worst thing that could happen would be a problem with the one resource that makes everything tick. That's exactly the hot water steambot Captain Leeway finds himself in, confronted by the moist mystery of a fuel source that's chewing through his metal comrades. To get to the bottom of it, you've got to shoot your bolt with precision, bouncing bullets off of ceilings, floors, and more in this turn-based puzzler. In between sessions of target practice you'll unwind at the local watering hole, adjusting your crew's gear and forging fresh bonds to get the job done.

Legions of demons welcome you to the netherworld they call home – and it's never looked so good.

HELL IS EMPTY

...And all the devils are here in **Shin Megami Tensei V: Vengeance**. Jess Kinghorn gets down with her demons

We've done it! The summoning circle we laid out worked, and Shin Megami Tensei will return to PlayStation at long last on 14 June. However, as is so often the case when things are plucked from the other side, the fifth instalment has come back different. Previously only available on Nintendo Switch, this expanded rerelease is making its PS5 and PS4 debut with a fresh thirst for revenge as Shin Megami Tensei V: Vengeance.

Shinjiro Takata, the producer of that original Switch release as well as Vengeance, tells us, "After the great response it received [on Nintendo Switch], we were excited to expand the reach to more users with additional platforms. Therefore, we started to develop the best SMT V possible by carefully improving the game system and adding in new elements to the game, rather than just porting the game as is."

What was already an expansive, turn-based RPG has doubled in size; alongside the original release's story path, the Canon Of Creation, there's a new narrative arc.

Game director Shigeo Komori shares, "It does not matter which one you play first, but in terms of completeness, I would be happy for those to enjoy the new Canon Of Vengeance for the full experience."

You'll able to choose which story path to walk early on, though neither has ever been available on PlayStation before. Playing through both easily amounts to well over 100 hours spent getting down with your demons.

"During the development of SMT V, there were many ideas brought up during the brainstorming phase that were Megatenisk [and would fit the Shin Megami Tensei series]," Komori goes on to say. "We created Vengeance to bring those ideas that did not get implemented in SMT V to everyone."

Exploring themes of – you guessed it – getting your own back, the additional arc brings a more human touch to the established story. It's done through expanding existing plot beats and introducing all-new characters, chief among them transfer student Yoko Hiromine.

Vengeance character designer and longtime series artist Masayuki Doi handles the introductions: "One of the initial ideas for the previous Shin Megami Tensei V release was the character Yoko Hiromine. In this work, she appears in the Canon Of Vengeance arc," he says. "She is enrolled at St Marina Academy, which is different from the Jouin High School that the main protagonist attends. Once called a 'saint,' she possesses a mysterious power and has learned exorcism magic. You can learn more about her as she joins your party, and you progress through the new storyline."

Enthusiastically, he adds, "I hope you all look forward to battling with her in Vengeance!"

MAKING FIENDS

Our hands-on with the Canon Of Vengeance story route begins at a point when we've already become fast friends with Yoko plus a few more devilish allies. We're set up not only with a four-person party of characters »

all at around level 40, but also with a full stable of powerful demons we can swap more or less freely in and out of our front line too. And the best part? This entire hellish backbench levels up right alongside our four-fiend front line.

To begin with, new girl Yoko joins us as a guest character, along with returning classmate Tao Isonokami – they're not permanent parts of the lineup, coming and going as the story dictates. That said, it's hard for us not to rely on these girls' very specific set of skills.

Offering healing-focussed moves, Tao is an idealist who proves the perfect foil to the more pragmatic Yoko. By this point in the story, we've already learned that Tao is working with Bethel, a secret organisation that vanquishes all demons that make it into the real world.

Our next stop is an apocalyptic alternate Tokyo known as Da'at, a netherworld ravaged by a hellish war. This is the result of a power vacuum at the tippy-top of the pantheon, where the biggest cheese, the Creator, has been slain and their throne left empty. Before we head on down, we first get situated at Jozoji temple. This is meant to be, for all intents and purposes, a mostly demon-free zone thanks to the tireless efforts of Bethel but... Hey, what's that over there?

Sporting luscious locks, luxurious scales, and a striking beak, new demon Amabie is hard to look past, though she's nonetheless surprised that we can see her. Striking up a conversation, Amabie explains she hopped over to Tokyo topside in the hope of taking to the stage and becoming top-tier talent. Unfortunately, we're the first person to even say a word to her, and she seizes the opportunity to ask if we could "perchance, 'Help a girl out?'" Who are we to say no after such a charming attempt to get on our high schooler protagonist's level?

"OVER 40 NEW DEMONS, INCLUDING AMABIE, JOIN THE RANKS OF YOUR POTENTIAL ALLIES."

"Amabie is my favourite," producer Shinjiro Takata shares. "It takes a little effort to make her an ally, but she is very creepy-cute, so please give her a try in your battles."

Game director Shigeo Komori agrees: "Amabie is also my favourite. [Her] skill cutscene was wonderful and became my favourite."

The support skill animation in question sees Amabie put her fins together to pose up a storm like only

4

3

1 Tao and new girl Yoko join the Nahobino as guest characters in our hands-on and throughout the Canon Of Vengeance. 2 A member of the Qadištu, Namaah is thirsty for power. She's a fun villainess, but she'll trample you if you're not careful. 3 Leader of the Qadištu, Lilith is motivated by more than just a bone to pick. Whatever her true goal, she's willing to sacrifice you for it. 4 It's well worth chatting up demons throughout the Netherworld – though not everyone is friendly. Don't get ambushed!

the most enthusiastic of rising star Idol singers can.

Over 40 new demons, including Amabie, join the ranks of your potential allies in Vengeance. Though the full roster borrows from mythologies from around the globe, Amabie hails from Japanese folklore, with their emergence from the sea said to either herald a bountiful harvest or be an omen of widespread sickness to come. In the latter case it is said that drawing her or otherwise crafting your own little Amabie could ward off illness, hence she saw a resurgence in popularity during the coronavirus pandemic, and it's why she's been playfully interpreted as a starry-eyed visitor to the human world here. If you manage to recruit her, she'll do her best to keep your party on their feet.

GIRL BOSS

But it's not all heart hands and 'helping a girl out,' as plenty of other demons are definitely not on your side. All-new villainous quartet the Qadištu also walk the path of Vengeance – and, to be clear, it's pronounced 'Ka-dish-too,' not 'Caddy stew' as one mixed-up demon in our hands-on insists. This powerful party, also adorning our gorgeous cover, is led by an SMT heavy-hitter.

"Lilith is my favourite [new demon design in Vengeance]," artist Masayuki Doi tells us, adding mysteriously, "I feel that I was able to design her in a way that is appropriate for her role as an important demon in this work."

If you haven't read up on your apocryphal texts, the short

FROM SMT TO P(ERSONA)

Why Persona is far from Shin Megami Tensei's final form

Our feature starting on p50 comprehensively breaks down the Shin Megami Tensei series' history, and details how it spawned the massively popular Persona sub-series. Still, it's a messy family tree so we ask producer Shinjiro Takata what sets SMT apart.

"The way we approach it has not changed significantly, but we are striving to differentiate the series more from the Persona series," he begins. "There are a number of differences, but one clear point is that if Persona is a story in which 'people are the masters', then Shin Megami Tensei is a story in which 'people are involved in an epic conflict between god and the demons.'"

He adds, "In SMT, we question people's [values] by asking 'What is considered just?' or 'Is [what is wanted by] the majority [...] just?' This style is distinctive not only compared to Persona, but also to other RPGs, and is an important and appealing characteristic that can only be experienced in SMT."

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI V

Now this is one girl gang we're *dying* to be a part of. Do you think the Qadištu are taking auditions for a fifth member?

"LILITH HAS RECRUITED A DEMONIC GIRL GANG FROM THE HALLS OF RELIGIOUS MYTHOLOGY."

» version of Lilith's legend is that she's thought to be the first wife of the Bible's first man, Adam. However, she is said to have been cast out of Eden for refusing to be a deferential wife to her husband – *someone* clearly couldn't handle even a little bit of constructive criticism. As such, you can understand why Lilith is so popularly pitched as 'the scorned woman' in modern reimaginings, although Vengeance imagines Lilith as dreaming beyond showing up just one small man.

Doi says, "Lilith has often appeared as an important demon in past works, so we felt that she was a suitable leader considering her high recognition [among] fans."

Lilith has recruited a demonic girl gang from the halls of religious mythology; filling out the ranks are the sensual Naamah, the creepy-but-compelling Eisheth Zenunim, and finally the magically-minded Agrat bat Mahlat. Facing even one member of the squad is a capital-S situation, to say nothing of taking on all four Qadištu members at once. It probably goes without saying, then, that the Canon Of Vengeance steers you into conflict with this kabbalistic quad just as often as it can – but what do its members want with you?

Naturally, your protagonist is no ordinary human high school student; when we travel to Da'at, he transforms into the Nahobino, an elegant, ethereal figure with flowing blue locks.

Masayuki Doi offers his artistic insight, saying, "We imagined a primordial deity called Nahobino and adopted patterns (such as spirals) that are often common among ancient civilisations, aiming to create a design that is not too dependent on any particular civilisation."

The Nahobino is a fusion of the protagonist's human self and the Aogami, who is neither a demon nor an angel but a secret third thing willing to offer his essence to ensure you survive the demonic onslaught of Da'at. To put it another way, the Nahobino is neither human nor demon but something new that threatens the established order. The Qadištu have designs on the Nahobino as more than just a powerful pawn in their schemes, but ultimately the sacrificial main dish in a devilish feast of machinations.

TEENAGE WASTELAND

But before we can unpick these devilish dames' designs, let's explore Da'at. Touching down from Jozoji temple, we soon find ourselves in an area of the Netherworld so massive that we can't help but feel a wee bit sorry for poor old Nintendo Switch. Playing on PS5, the framerate is buttery smooth even as we »

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI V

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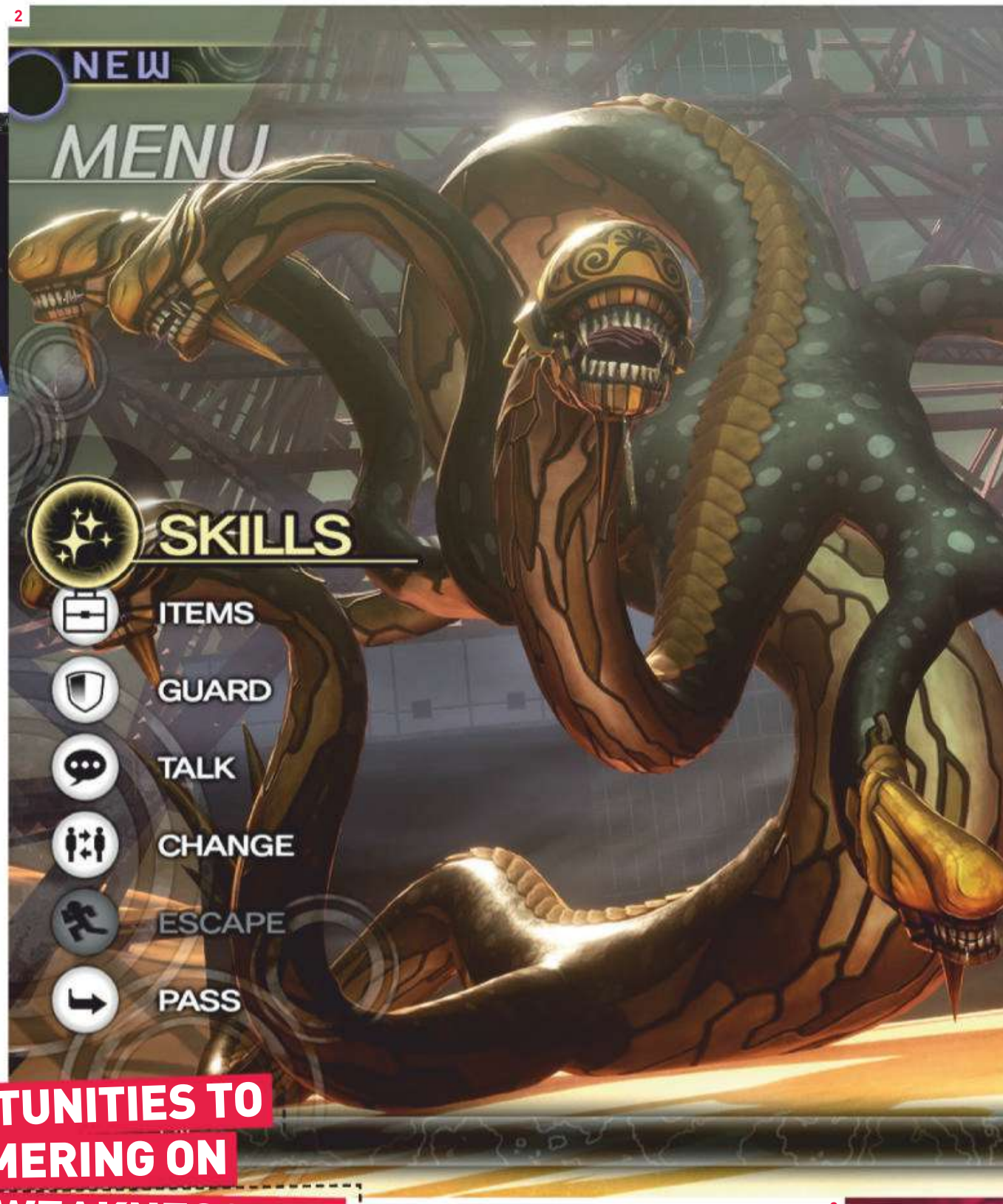

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1 Tao was already an ally in the Canon Of Creation, but her friendship with Yoko in the new story route gives her extra dimension. 2 Even low-level fights can see you knocked flat if you don't make the most of Vengeance's Press Turn system. Send this HR Giger reject packing! 3 Turns out *that's* what Eisheth Zenunim was hiding. We wish we'd never asked... 4 "Hey, we saw you from across the netherworld and love your vibe..."

hop on a Magatsu rail and grind over vast chunks of the map.

Exploring a dreamy forested valley that looks a bit like a coral reef on dry land, grass blooms alight as we run through it and, distracted by the spectacle, we walk straight into our first proper fight with an Archangel. Archangels are members of the no-fun squad, and if you don't make the most of the Press Turn battle system – scoring extra opportunities to attack by hammering on enemies' elemental weaknesses – you'll find yourself very bored as these winged whiners heal and heal again if given

"SCORE EXTRA OPPORTUNITIES TO ATTACK BY HAMMERING ON ENEMIES' ELEMENTAL WEAKNESSES."

the chance. However, with both Yoko and serendipitously the demon Baphomet in our party, we make short work of these feather-brained foes.

As Yoko sets the field ablaze, she utters, "I can't afford to fail" – intense, but we're glad someone's taking this seriously.

Still, if our party front line hadn't already been so strong, we could easily have swapped in a mighty demon from our back bench, or given ourselves an extra edge with Magatsuhi skills. These rely on a special gauge that can be filled in a few different ways, including by scooping up red orbs scattered throughout Da'at. In battle, the gauge fills up gradually for both sides each

round – and enemies can sacrifice a number of their actions to gather enough Magatsuhi one turn to knock us flat the next. Two can play at this game, though, and our flowing-haired protagonist whips out the Magatsuhi support skill Omagatoki, handily ensuring our entire party dishes out nothing but crits before the other side has a chance to strike.

This is far from the last Archangel we fell, as very few of their winged allies are willing to exchange even a few civil words. Party member Tao, having previously thought we were all playing on the same demon-slaying side, is floored that not one of them will listen to reason. Yoko gently but firmly tells Tao that the Archangels would've killed us given half the chance and that we need to watch our backs from now on.

And she's right – it's not long before we smack our forehead against another Angel, though this one decides our presence is a sign of divine providence. They ask us to smite "a barbarian who refuses to accept God," and gestures towards the precipice behind them. Below, we see a demon who towers far above the land surrounding it, let alone anything else we've faced so far... and decide "Sure, we can take him."

The completely optional boss Gogmagog exerts a strange force that draws us uncomfortably close as we approach, revealing a sizeable health bar in battle and more than a little overambition on our part. We try to run but Gogmagog keeps pulling us back... so we tap L1 to zap back to

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where we first entered Da'at. Let's put a pin in that one.

CHOPPING IT UP

After all there's plenty more to see, from an incendiary bit of gardening against a field of Narcissus to getting mugged by Dormarth frolicking in the snow to teaming up with Sukuna-Hikona on a netherworld-spanning treasure hunt. Whether it be in battles or side-quests, demons are bursting with personality, in part owing to excellently deployed voice lines. However, there's one sight we almost wish we could wipe from our minds.

The first sign of trouble presents itself amid ruined roads and tracks, where a curious Muu Shuwuu asks us "Big boxes on wheels used to move on them, right?" Before we can ask, 'What's this doing here?' she adds, "Maybe that's why there's a strong demon on wheels nearby!"

Undeterred, we press on – and that's when we hear the cackling. Don't repeat our mistake; make sure you save often, especially as you can save almost anywhere in Vengeance.

Looming out of the mist, a mean, green machine approaches at speed. With nowhere to run and even fewer places to look, we're forced to battle the confronting silhouette of Mara. He absorbs a bunch of our magic, before poisoning the Nahobino and wiping the floor with the rest of our party. That's a game over, baby.

Our second attempt is somehow even more embarrassing, and on the third go around Mara decides he wants to negotiate. He demands an absurd amount of dosh, before letting us go – but only momentarily. To add insult to injury, the green meanie gives chase while we run for our lives. When we find ourselves with enough room to breathe, there are two things we know to be true: 14 June isn't far off, and we will have our revenge. ■

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI

Who's your demonic peanut butter and jelly? Mido's here to help you summon anew.

CATHEDRAL OF SHADOWS

Where demons gather – charting the course of the supernatural sci-fi RPG series that's constantly being reborn

Like other titans of the RPG genre, Megami Tensei has been around since the 1980s and the 8-bit console era. The first game in the series was released in 1987, the same year as Final Fantasy and only a year after Dragon Quest. Yet while those contemporaries took a while to reach English-speaking audiences, Megami Tensei had an even slower start, not really flourishing until PS2 despite having its beginnings on PS1.

To add to the confusion, while its contemporaries have often led to spinoffs and sub-series, what constitutes the mainline of Megami Tensei, or indeed, Shin Megami Tensei (they're different) can be much less clear. Rather than each numbered entry being discrete, Megami Tensei was divided into distinct sub-series from early on. For example, Shin Megami Tensei II and Shin Megami Tensei If... were released in the same year, SMT: Devil Summoner connects with Persona 2, and then there's Persona itself. That spinoff series has in many way usurped the core one thanks to gaining massive international popularity – the Shin Megami Tensei prefix having dropped on and off Persona game titles over the years.

Confusing, yes? But if anything it just goes to show how delightfully experimental the series is, even if at its core it's always drawing from the same pot of great RPG ideas and mechanics. After all, the demons you summon, fight, and befriend are often based upon a set of core designs. So what makes them so often feel so fresh? From SMT to Persona, let's take you through the ins and outs of what it really means to be Shin Megami Tensei on PlayStation.

1 In Lucifer's Call you're a demi-fiend, the conflict between human and devil core to the plot. 2 SMT If... recasts its demonic invasion as the problem for you and your high-school friends, and feels like a Persona blueprint.

SMT'ING OFF

Even starting with 'Shin' (which essentially means 'new') isn't quite enough to get a handle on this series, which actually began in the '80s on 8-bit consoles as Digital Devil Story: Megami Tensei – a first-person dungeon crawler developed by Atlus that saw a boy and a girl teaming up with demons to navigate a labyrinth and defeat Lucifer, who had been conjured into the human world via a demon-summoning program. It was based on a popular trilogy of books by Aya Nishitani, with the name Megami Tensei meaning 'Reincarnation Of The Goddess' (cycles of rebirth and renewal often feature as themes).

It wasn't the only adaptation of the work, with Telenet developing its own at the same time for PC. Telenet's was released slightly earlier and featured top-down, real-time combat. Atlus instead cribbed from '80s RPG hits like Wizardry, with first-person exploration and combat. The ability to befriend, recruit, and even fuse demons together to build your own party is what made Atlus' version stand out, and soon led to a sequel. The unique mechanics, combined with the science-fantasy nature of the premise – dark web black magic set against the backdrop of modern-day Tokyo – deserved to pierce the veil.

Enter Shin Megami Tensei in the '90s, a chance for Atlus to reimagine the series on 16-bit consoles and really make it its own. In this followup, you witness a scientist opening a portal to the realm of demons, and the military's disastrous intervention. However, you're plucked from your own time and sent years into the future, now tasked with surviving in the ruins of a post-apocalyptic Tokyo. In whose image the world is remade is a big part of the plot, with your moral choices affecting the narrative as well as how party members and demons feel about you. Shin Megami Tensei II developed this with a setting even further in the future, within a new, surviving civilisation. Meanwhile, Shin Megami Tensei If... reimagined these revamped mechanics by being set in a high school, a denser setting with even more variation coming from the decisions you made (like which students to team up with) – a kind of proto-Persona.

"WHEN THE GAMES WERE PORTED TO PS1 THEY BECAME MORE ACCESSIBLE OUTSIDE JAPAN."

"You wouldn't download a demon" sums up the entire Shin Megami Tensei series.

LANGUAGE BARRIER

It wasn't until the games were ported to PS1 that they became more accessible outside Japan, with imports being easier for Western players to get their hands on. The dungeon crawling mechanics were easy enough to grok without fully understanding the language, but the detailed summoning system and demon negotiation mechanics could lead to a lot of trial and error. As the 'demons' drew upon mythologies from around the world, including Biblical references, it was probably a gamble to approach American markets with the idea back then.

It wasn't until Shin Megami Tensei's third entry, Lucifer's Call (known as Nocturne in the States and for its 2021 remaster) that we finally got to experience the core series in English. The jump to PS2 led to quite the overhaul. Gorgeous block colours

Shin Megami Tensei 1992 (PS 2001)

Shin Megami Tensei II 1994 (PS 2002)

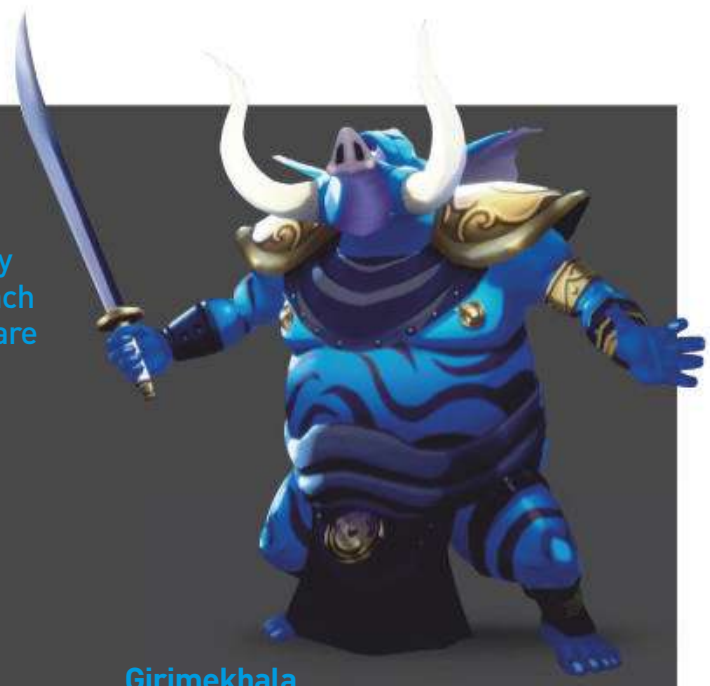
and shadows made this a post-apocalypse like little else, mixing high-tech science with spiritualism (prayer wheels, for instance, allow you to access a sort of magical digital highway for fast travel), all within a ruined Tokyo once more. First-person exploration was ditched in favour of a more freeform third-person perspective, and the battle system was completely retooled.

The Press Turn system set the pace for the momentum-based mechanics that would become core to Shin Megami Tensei and its spinoffs in the future, rewarding targeting enemy vulnerabilities with extra turns. This was factored into the difficulty; rather than fights becoming a walk in the park they were often fast-paced puzzles of buffs and elemental magic requiring you to put a lot of thought into how you built your team. SMT III's style, tone, and mechanics would go on to form the basis of Persona's mid-series retool with Persona 3, plus a spinoff of its own in the shape of SMT: Digital Devil Saga.

While SMT IV's duology has never been released for any platform other than Nintendo 3DS, its influence can be felt in the series' subsequent entries. Which is all to say that while SMT V's long-awaited return to PlayStation comes after 21 years away, the many branches of the SMT tree have ensured it hasn't been forgotten.

DEMON COMPENDIUM

Enemies and allies constantly return, and it's a joy to see each SMT reinterpret them. Here are team PLAY's faves



Girimekhala

The cursed eye of this figure from Sri Lankan mythology is the least of your problems if you face it in battle. Beware instead its penchant for reflecting physical attacks right back your way. Yet reverse that yourself and recruit him to your side, and you have an invaluable ally against foes who are less magically inclined. Thank us later.

Belphegor

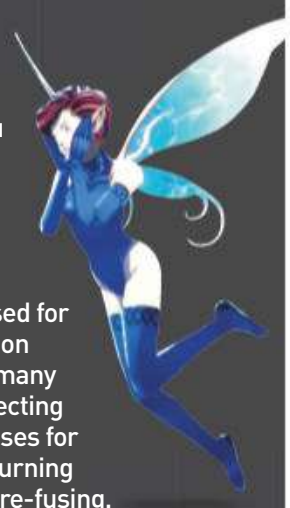
Look at him go – an IBS King we can relate to, stuck on the lav but still able to get the job done. We also have to respect this design, adapted from the Dictionnaire Infernal image of the slothful arch-devil, but with a modern cistern-bility. Often a boss you can later recruit, he's frequently an early taste of large magical power.

Scáthach

From Celtic myth, this Scots warrior woman taught Cú Chulainn the art of war. Witchy in appearance here, she usually balances mighty stats across both Strength and Magic. And when it comes to spells, her arsenal often includes hard-hitting, multi-targeting ones. Always a welcome sight in any party.

Jack Frost

Hee-ho! The de facto mascot of Shin Megami Tensei has received minimal redesigning over the years thanks to the strength of his original look – all toothy grin and pointed hat. The Jack family also features Pyro Jack, Black Frost, and more. But while variants can sometimes be more powerful in some ways, when it comes to *brand* power, this is the one and only.



Pixie

The humble pixie is often one of the earliest demons you encounter. A vital friend, their healing powers come in handy at the beginning, and can almost always be used for some powerful demon fusions. Better yet, many games reward respecting your pixie with bonuses for keeping their soul burning through game-long re-fusing.

Shin Megami Tensei If... 1994 (PS 2002)

Shin Megami Tensei: Lucifer's Call 2003

Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner 1995 (PS 2005)
Shin Megami Tensei: Soul Hackers 1997 (PS 1999)
Soul Hackers 2 2022

HACKER VOICE: WE'RE IN

Easy though it is to forget about this sub-series – notable for spotty releases and even spottier localisation – modern-era SMT and Persona owe Devil Summoner a great debt. It was the first in the series to ditch the apocalyptic scenario for a near-future Japan in which the shadowy world of demons is more of a hidden, underground element. It also developed negotiating with demons into back-and-forth chats rather than the simpler menus and binary choices of earlier releases. Which makes it all the more a shame that, despite coming to PSP, the original Devil Summoner has never officially been released in English in any form.

The first game centres on demon summoner and private detective Kyouji Kuzonoha – or, at least, the player character who ends up possessing his body. After a hit from evil devil summoners goes awry, it falls to you to unravel the secrets of your hometown and stop the world from being destroyed. While the COMP had featured in earlier games, using this near-future portable computer to wrangle demons feels much more realised here, as does the use of the NET for tips.

DIABOLUS EX MACHINA

That's where sequel Soul Hackers takes its cues for a setting even further in the future, a technologically advanced city with high-tech systems that are literally conduits for the demonic. The legacy sequel, 2022's Soul Hackers 2, builds on this further by having you play as an AI creation, sent into the world to help rebalance the forces of good and evil. This recent release took firm inspiration from Persona for its character-focussed narrative, in addition to revisiting the more linear story progression of previous entries. It also brought back the original Devil Summoner's memorable supporting cast (like the vampiric Victor and mysterious Madame Ginko). Here's hoping the series returns again in the future.

1 '90s SMT is all about first-person dungeon crawling, even in spinoffs like Devil Summoner. 2 Soul Hackers' turn-of-the-millenium vibes are immaculate. 3 The recent sequel's Sabbath system involves mass demon summoning for big beatdowns.

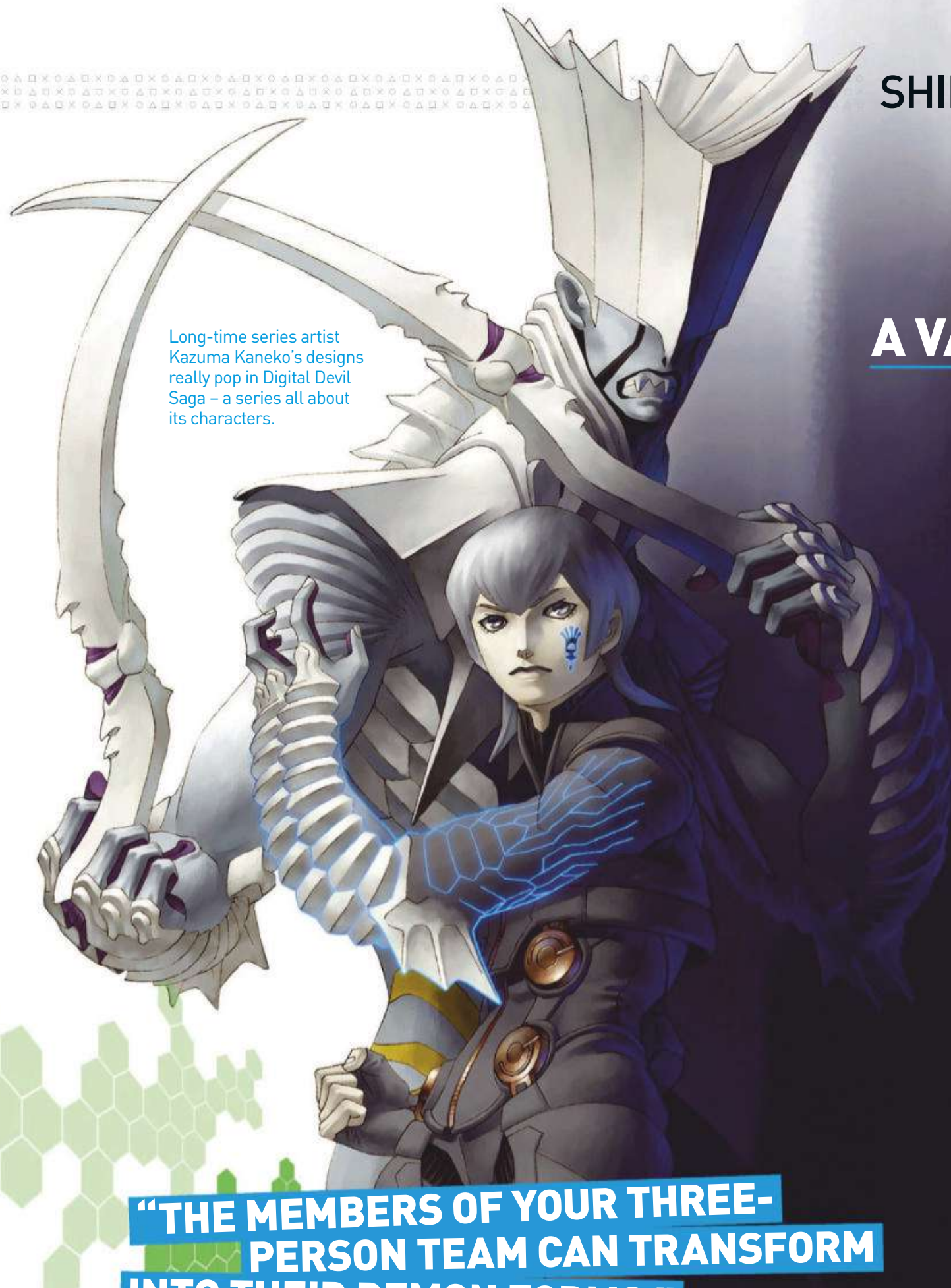
THERE LIVED A CERTAIN MAN

Technically part of the Devil Summoner series, these real-time action PS2 games are years rather than worlds apart. Set during Japan's Taisho period (around the 1920s), they follow a member of the Kuzunoha family of devil summoners – Raidou Kuzunoha XIV (many of the Kuzunoha family names are themselves inherited titles). Working as a detective, Raidou investigates supernatural cases – which, naturally, lead to high-stakes conspiracy – and even butts heads with rival devil summoner Grigori Rasputin (yes, really).

Both Raidou Kuzunoha games feature similar hack-and-slash combat when you stumble into a random battle, drawing upon moves from the turn-based games and seeing you fight alongside demonic allies. How you befriend those beings is a little different in each; the first game is built around weakening and then capturing enemies, whereas the sequel, King Abaddon, reintroduces a negotiation-style mechanic like the rest of the series. This duology is definitely a compelling curiosity. It would be great to see the series return to both real-time action and a historical setting one day.

Demon allies comment on Raidou's prowess during combat. They're tough to impress, mind you.

Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner – Raidou Kuzunoha Vs The Soulless Army 2006
Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner 2 – Raidou Kuzunoha Vs King Abaddon 2008



Long-time series artist Kazuma Kaneko's designs really pop in Digital Devil Saga – a series all about its characters.

"THE MEMBERS OF YOUR THREE-PERSON TEAM CAN TRANSFORM INTO THEIR DEMON FORMS."

A VAMPIRIC VIRUS

Okay, you've got a great system in SMT III's Press Turn battles. But that game's fights could get really tough, the way to progress could be needlessly obtuse, and the sheer amount of possibility when it came to party-building also led to players speccing down fruitless paths for hours. Digital Devil Saga asks: what if we did away with all that to create something more straightforward, but soaked it in enough personality to keep you hooked anyway?

Conceiving the game as a duology with a strong narrative right from the start of development, the team worked with novelist Yu Godai to come up with the two games' premise and structure. It's set within a digital combat simulator, the Junkyard, where it rains eternally, the tribes within set upon by a strange virus that causes them to transform into demonic forms hungry for flesh. Centring on the Embryon tribe's quest for survival, and their attempt to reach Nirvana (and to go beyond it in the sequel), it's a melancholy yet memorable tale that oozes 'oos energy in all the right ways.

DEVIL INSIDE

Great visual design even means the games hold up really well today, with the stark lighting and bold colours really popping, even when you're simply exploring the environments. In a very similar way to SMT III you're running and fighting in a third-person perspective, with the exception being how your party members control.

Due to the transformation premise, you don't recruit different demons. Rather, the members of your three-person team can simply transform into their demon forms – or not, if you prefer. There are strategic pros and cons when it comes to giving the command to transform – even more so in the sequel, which introduced a berserk mode. The need to level up each character's single demon form made this a more focussed experience than most SMT titles with their more freeform approach, which makes it feel fresh among its peers.

1 Demon summoning? It's time for demon becoming. 2 Digital Devil Saga 2's cast moved beyond the digital realm.

Shin Megami Tensei: Digital Devil Saga 2004

Shin Megami Tensei: Digital Devil Saga 2 2005

NOW IT'S PERSONA-L

Bizarre and winding is the road to playing through just Persona's core entries, though it has to be said, every game in the series has been released officially in English, which is more than you can say for a lot of Shin Megami Tensei. No doubt its presence in English since the '90s has helped establish this sub-series as the usurper it is today.

The first game was originally released as Revelations: Persona in English (and UK players had to be import it from the US). Retaining SMT's first-person dungeon crawling with top-down overworld navigation, it plays similarly to those older entries with the big change being that multiple human characters summon demons – known as personas here – for magical attacks, rather than the demons being party members themselves. Fights also take place in third-person across a grid layout, better visualising some of the concepts from earlier titles.

Everything takes place in a town overrun by the subconscious of a high school girl; it's up to her classmates to save her by combing through maze-like dungeons. The notion of accepting the persona given by the mysterious Philemon gives the party an opportunity to face their own inner demons as well. The sequel duology Persona 2: Innocent Sin, and Persona 2: Eternal Punishment takes this further with deeper character writing, and expands on the idea of the shared consciousness of a population having the power to shape the world around them (eventually bringing conspiracy theories to life).

However, for the English-language release of Revelations: Persona some bizarre edits were made, including the axing of the Snow Queen route (a sort of extra-challenging bonus campaign that nevertheless has some great narrative moments). And of Persona 2's PS1 releases, only the sequel, Eternal Punishment, was translated into English. It wasn't until PSP's launch, along with enhanced releases of Persona and Persona 2: Innocent Sin, that we could appreciate them as intended (frustratingly, the similarly enhanced PSP version of Persona 2: Eternal Punishment never came out in English – though the classic version was at least downloadable on PS3.

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"HUMAN CHARACTERS SUMMON DEMONS – KNOWN AS PERSONAS – FOR MAGICAL ATTACKS."

SEES OF CAKE

With Persona 3, which introduced huge changes that paid off big-time, this sub-series began to take off. You play as a transfer student who discovers that Tatsumi Port Island exists in the spectral shadow of Tartarus, a huge tower that appears only during a hidden 'Dark Hour' and sends out shadows to drain the life of the town's citizens. Attending school doesn't just provide ample structure to meet and team up with fellow persona-users in order to put a stop to all that, it forms the backbone of the school-year-long story as it plays out day after day. Managing your social life to power up your persona's abilities is as important as grinding through the dungeon.

The release of SMT III between the second and third Persona games meant that when it came to combat Persona 3's developers had much-improved foundations to build upon, evolving Press Turn into the One-More system. It was a simpler approach to the momentum-based combat that rewarded players with powerful All-Out Attacks. However, in dialling into the essentials the

Revelations: Persona 1996

Persona 2: Innocent Sin 1999

Persona 2: Eternal Punishment 2000

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI

4

1 With a huge party and loads of demons to fight at once, the original Persona can get crunchy. 2 Persona 3 Reload is the series' most ambitious remake to date, itself inheriting ideas from Persona 5. The summoning ritual, as ever, continues. 3 Anyone who tucked a PS Vita into their travel bag fell in love with Persona 4's cast thanks to its on-the-go Golden port. 4 Persona 5 made dungeon exploring more than a grind – it's full of secrets and big spaces that are fun simply to run around.

developers perhaps went too far when it came to the game's AI-controlled party members, though thankfully you're given direct control again in the PSP release and the recent remake. While demon fusing also returned, this was simplified as well, with enemies replaced by shadows, so you earn demons as cards rather than battling and negotiating with them.

Persona 4 took all this further without changing the combat too much. Instead, the focus was on having a stronger, more complex narrative that saw you unravelling a small-town murder mystery and progressing through multiple dungeons instead of a single tower.

It's easy to see how Persona 4 led to Persona 5, with the discrete dungeons getting built out into fully explorable spaces. Each is a psychological space within a character's mind (as Phantom Thieves, you're stealing the hearts of corrupt figures). But P5's developers also looked back to prior SMT games when seeking areas to improve. Demons return in combat. As do negotiations. And while the baton pass made the One-More system slicker, previously cut elements and equipment types (such as guns!) returned to add a smidge more complexity to how you build your team, with this further enhanced in P5 Royale through demon attributes.

None of these SMT sub-series is truly siloed off. Though each feels unique, there's been a constant exchange of ideas throughout its history. SMT V isn't just a sequel to SMT III and SMT IV, it's also a sequel to Persona 5, to SMT: Devil Summoner, and more. It's history in the making. ■

ONE-MORE?

SMT's non-PlayStation spinoffs most due a return

SMT: Nine
An Xbox exclusive available only in Japanese. In other words: barely anyone, anywhere, has ever played this. Which is a shame, as its setting within the virtual world of the Idea Space, combined with an almost Digimon-like partner system is a very cool direction for the series.

Persona Q
This duology is trapped on Nintendo 3DS. A shame, not only because it's a cast crossover between Persona 3, 4, and 5 but because its dungeon-crawling gameplay neatly combines SMT history while scratching the Etrian Odyssey itch (former EO devs worked on this).

SMT: Strange Journey
When a bizarre rift brings a kind of Hell-on-Earth to the Antarctic, it's up to a special ops team to investigate. As crunchy as they come, the focussed setting somehow feels grander than that of almost any other SMT game, the sense of foreboding building the deeper your team delves.

SMT: Devil Survivor
Given the huge number of demons that feature throughout the series, having them battle it out in Final Fantasy Tactics-like grid-based skirmishes was bound to happen sooner or later. This series combines that action with a hip, modern-day Tokyo setting that's a joy to explore.

SMT: Devil Children
This kids-oriented spinoff for Game Boy dares to ask the question: what if the Pokémon Satanic Panic in the '90s was better justified? Yet, if you think about it, what better lesson is there for kids that, as well as using demons to battle, you can talk it out and become allies?

Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3 2006

Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 4 2008

Persona 5 2016

VISIONS OF MANA

Strong roots

Series producer Masaru Oyamada talks with Oscar Taylor-Kent on nurturing the long-lived RPG series to sprout anew with **Visions Of Mana**

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** SUMMER 2024
PUB SQUARE ENIX / **DEV** OUKA STUDIOS / **PLAYERS** 1

VISIONS OF MANA

The Mana tree features in every game in the series.

VISIONS OF MANA

1 Exploring needn't take an age – with Pikul on hand you can quickly go from A to B. **2** Visions Of Mana's world is designed to make you want to run out and explore it. **3** You can open up certain parts of this bug boss to taking even more damage.

lmost 18 years will have passed between the launch of Visions Of Mana and the last main entry in the series, PS2's Dawn Of Mana – a game that didn't even receive a European release. It may have been a long time, but that's not to say the garden that surrounds this Mana tree has become wild and overgrown. Rather, the team behind Mana has been taking the time to make sure the soil is ready for something new to sprout.

After getting the chance to play the game (see last issue for our first impressions!), we sat down with series producer Masaru Oyamada. His history with Mana stretches back beyond working with Square Enix. "I've been there right from the beginning, back from 1991," he says about when he first started playing. Working on the titles, though, began back in 2006 when "I worked with Mr Koichi Ishii, the creator of the Mana series, on mobile versions." These Japanese-exclusive titles included Mana Mobile and Friends Of Mana for feature phones, devices popular with Japanese commuters.

BOTANY CLASS

Then, in 2014, he took over the role of series producer. It was then that the seed of Visions Of Mana was planted. "When I took over the stewardship of the Mana series, I realised that all of the classic Mana titles weren't available to play on the current generation of hardware," says Oyamada. "At that point, I did want to make a new game, but I felt that we needed to prepare for it first by bringing back the older games, doing a series of remakes and remasters." Nurturing the series in this way, they could also plan for the future of Mana at the same time. "While we were working on those we could start preparing and looking towards doing a new game rather than just jump straight into it."

So came Adventures Of Mana for PS Vita in 2016, a 3D remake of the classic Mystic Quest (which was Final Fantasy Gaiden in Japan – Mana technically started out as a spinoff before becoming a series in its own right), followed by a similar 3D remake of Secret Of Mana for PS4 in 2018.

But while 2020's Trials Of Mana for PS4 was also a 3D remake, the team experimented with making more changes. "We actually went quite in depth into that and did it in a slightly more involved way, [...] rather than just brushing over the top," says Oyamada. "People seemed to really respond to that. I was very happy to see that there was a great reaction to that game." With fast-paced real-time combat, and a more zoomed-in camera you could control, it felt like a big overhaul. While combos made its scraps exciting, you could pause time to make more careful decisions as well – systems that would be elaborated on in Visions Of Mana.

After Trials, the team put out a survey for fans "asking them about the future of the Mana series," Oyamada tells us. There was an "overwhelming amount of support, of people asking for a completely new Mana game". It was a challenge the remakes had helped the team prepare for, especially with the adjustments to Trials' mechanics.

saw the direction we wanted to go with development." With that confidence, and players asking for a new title, the leaves in the canopy had aligned: "That's when we felt we were in the right place and should probably start working on the next big new game."

FOR THE TREES

Technological improvements have made some aspects of development easier, but for Oyamada "what's really important with [Mana] is the visual identity – the world, the characters, the look of the games," and with more technical power they've been able to "make those depictions that much richer [...] It does evolve it".

The goalposts were set up in the 16-bit era. "One thing we very much prioritised and really wanted to achieve with Visions Of Mana was to essentially recreate the atmosphere and the feeling of that classic artwork from the cover of the original Secret Of Mana, which Mr Hiroo Isono drew," says Oyamada. The box promised a fantasy world worth getting lost in as soon as you picked it up. "The Mana tree, with that really lush background of the forest. [We want] to recreate that kind of area and that kind of feeling for the world."

Beyond the Mana tree itself, nature is integral to Visions Of Mana's world. "It's surrounded by lush nature, and the elementals exist as living, breathing creatures within [it]," says Oyamada. "We came to the conclusion very quickly that we needed to make it a very broad, expansive world, but also have a very high verticality as well."

Not only are the inhabitants of the world in tune with nature as part of their daily lives, but the elementals become a part of Val and company's RPG journey through their usage in

"I felt that we needed to prepare for it first by bringing back the older games."

"We thought this was really going to be a solid base to start work on a new game," says Oyamada, of seeing Trials' gameplay come together midway through development. "That's when we kind of

1 Treasure chests are hidden off the beaten path, waiting to be uncovered. 2 As they journey the large world, Val and friends will grow closer as a team.

battles and exploring the environment. Oyamada highlights that director Ryosuke Yoshida (a former combat designer at Capcom) wants to "focus on and underline the idea that this is a living world, and that in the lives of the people in this world the elementals play a very important part".

GO, HENSHIN

Befriending the elementals will reward the party with vessels to unlock special powers. Equip a character with one, and they'll not only be able to use that skill on a cooldown in battle (such as dropping a whirlwind into the fray), but their class will change depending on the character using it. The windy sylphid boomerang, for instance, transforms Val from their basic guardian class into a runic knight, but dragon-like oracle Careena becomes a dancer when she wields it, and for the feline Morley it unlocks the nomad class.

"To be able to really leverage and exploit those actions the player has to the most, the world needed to be structured in that way," says Oyamada on having to create variety in order for each elemental to have their space to shine. "I really wanted to create that feeling you get from classic RPGs that I loved playing in the past, both old Mana series games and other RPGs, where the idea [is that] you're on this journey around the world, you visit lots of very different locations, and do cool things in each of them. And they all feel different."

"[We aim to] recreate the atmosphere and the feeling of that classic artwork from the cover of the original Secret Of Mana."

Which also means a mix of types of exploration, from open zones filled with side-quests and hidden treasure to more linear dungeons that still have their fair share of secrets. Oyamada tells us it's a "good mix" of the two types of areas. Val and co have a lot of mobility when running around, able to jump all over the place, and are aided by Pikul, a wolf-like creature they can ride. Elemental powers can be used to reach out-of-the-way treasure, and also to progress in the dungeons – rearranging rocks to create a bridge of floating platforms using wind powers, for example. It's somewhat prescriptive, but adds some flavour to rooting around.

GREEN HOUSE

Exploration has, after all, always been key to the Mana series. Where its contemporaries often divided the line between their open worlds and battles, Mana has always been about immersing you in one seamless experience where you clash with enemies in real time as you pick your way through beautiful environments, from before PS1 was even released. It's given the series a unique identity, though it's a space other games have become more comfortable in.

So what makes the series unique today? "I think there's obviously a

Friends of Mana

The pals you won't want to leaf

Hinna

Having grown up alongside Val in Tianeea, she's quite close to him – and she's also more than aware of Val's sense of adventure, and how he yearns to protect those he cares about. She attends the village's Faerie festival with him, where she is selected as the latest alm to journey to the Mana tree and restore power to its life-giving roots. But it's a potentially perilous journey and she's glad to have Val step up to help as her Soul Guard. Currently, we've not seen her partake in combat, but she's nonetheless a presence you feel on the path.

Val

The ever-optimistic Val grew up in the Fire Village of Tianeea, always curious about the wider world. Every four years the Faerie arrives at each village to appoint an alm to journey across the land to the Mana tree and help it recuperate its energy. When Val's best friend Hinna is selected for the honour, it's only natural that Val should step up to become her Soul Guard and accompany her on the quest. A versatile fighter, his classes can assist in protecting the friends he cares for, including with a big shield as an Aigis.

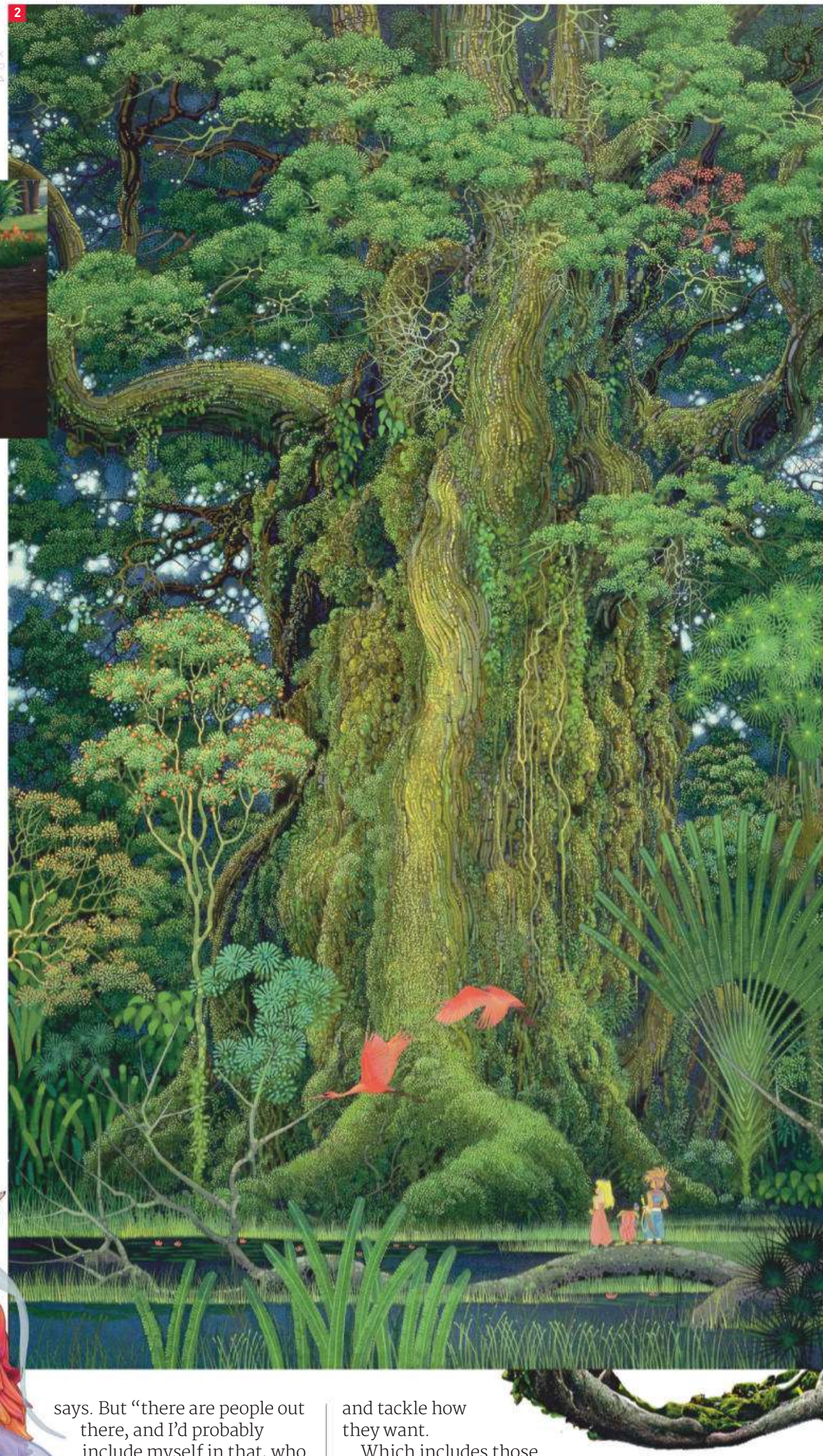
Careena & Ramcoh

The oracle Careena hails from Longren in the Vale Of Wind, and has the draconic features to match – though she lost one of her wings in an accident. Meeting up with Val and Hinna, who are on the same journey to the Mana tree, she's no-nonsense at first but warmer with those she can trust. Among them is Ramcoh, the sacred beast cub she's rarely seen without. In combat, some of her class skills see her twirling around and riding Ramcoh into the fray to bust skulls.

Morley

The enigmatic Morley comes from the Luna Land of Etaern. Haunted by a tragedy that struck his home town when he was a child, he's found himself having to shoulder the responsibility of the moon elementals, though questions whether he's worthy of handling such responsibility. Used to being alone, teaming up with the rest of the party allows him to finally tackle his past. A deft swordsman in some classes, able to used charged strikes, in others he's able to dual-wield daggers to fight even faster.

VISIONS OF MANA



1 Battles happen right on the field, often with cute beasties you feel a smidge guilty for slaying. We're sorry, little guys! 2 Hiroo Isono's Secret Of Mana artwork directly inspired the return to the series with Visions Of Mana. Appearing on the box in the '90s, it remains one of the most evocative pieces of box art from the period. 3 Careena is on her own quest to the Mana tree. The elementals and the tree itself are vital to the daily lives of people all across the world. 4 The elementals are a core part of Visions Of Mana's ecology.

lot of differing opinions and people will see different things of what makes the Mana series distinct and special," says Oyamada. "But from my perspective, I think it is that idea that you can enjoy it as an action game, but you can also enjoy it in terms of being an RPG as well and level up your characters and get through any of the challenges if you play like an RPG, [with] that option of enjoying it both ways."

FEET PLANTED

The fast-paced action feels great in the hands as we hot-swap between characters and pull off combos and special moves, pausing only to give ourselves time to heal a damaged fighter or carefully line up a fireball with a large boss' vulnerable limb. But it's also a game you can take more slowly, if you want, and you can grind a little to become strong enough to trounce monsters. We mention we used to do this in some harder old RPGs, and Oyamada grins: "Yeah, I had exactly the same experiences! I think there'll be a lot of people out there like that, so we wanted to leave the option in our game as well."

Oyamada nods to a rise in action RPGs that champion challenge as well. "That's great, people love those games," he says. But "there are people out there, and I'd probably include myself in that, who if a game is a pure action game, find it quite difficult to play and complete and see the end of the story. When I'm searching for new games to play, it's like, well, how easy is the action going to be on me?" Mana should be a world anyone can get lost in, and tackle how they want.

Which includes those who want to chase huge damage and heady combos. It's true to the whack-happy classic Mana titles, just with a zoomed-in, third-person camera, more fluidity to the chains of attacks, and the ability to switch characters and pick out your moves adding a strategic layer.

It's not dissimilar to the revamped combat in Final Fantasy

"You can enjoy it as an action game, but you can also enjoy it in terms of being an RPG as well."

VII Remake and Rebirth, also from Square Enix. Which puts Visions Of Mana in fantastic company. And it's something Oyamada has noticed, even though the similar combat system has arisen coincidentally. The Trials Of Mana remake, which was released at around the same time as Final Fantasy VII Remake, had a similar system as well.

"I remember looking at both those games, they came out at quite a similar time, there are a lot of similarities here and we both went in quite similar directions. It's not a deliberate thing," says Oyamada, when we ask if there had been any collaboration between departments – though Visions is being developed by NetEase's Ouka Studios. "There's not really any shared technology [...] but we have gone in similar directions – that is quite clear." Though he does note that, as a Square Enix team member and as an RPG fan, he keeps up to date with the new Final Fantasy titles and shares his thoughts with the Mana team. The future is looking bright for action RPGs.

Even though the team have made sure that past Mana games are accessible on modern hardware in some form, and Visions Of Mana is deliberately evocative of the spirit of those classic titles, it still feels modern to play – the world just as much fun to run around as the colourful monsters are to bash. Importantly, it tells its own tale, and new players won't need to have played the others first.

"We've deliberately designed this game to be easily accessible to newcomers. It obviously captures the essence, all the great things about the past games in the Mana series, and you'll very much get that through playing this game," says Oyamada, when we ask about players who might be intimidated by the nearly 20-year gap between main series releases. "But in terms of the feel of the gameplay, the controls, how easy it is to just get into the story and start playing, it's all been designed with newcomers in mind as well." One thing we do know: we can't wait to play more – we've seen the forest for the trees, with equal parts charm and clicky combat this could flourish.

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We'll be meeting several new tribes in Dawntrail.

Top jobs

Topjobs

FORMAT PS5, PS4
ETA SUMMER 2024
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PLAYERS MULTI

Final Fantasy XIV producer and director Naoki Yoshida speaks to Daniella Lucas about what goes into creating new job classes for the MMORPG – from revising old skills through updates to the difficulties of deciding what new ideas to bring to the table

FINAL FANTASY XIV

I have five expansions' worth of experience, and I'm looking for a role that pays me 35,000 Gil per annum.

I'm sorry sir. Would you wash cauldrons for 10 Gil per year?

The Dawntrail expansion is getting close now, with only a few more weeks before launch in July. We're excited for it to pull into port, but while we wait the dev team has given us a quick peek at the upcoming jobs and how all of our favourites will change with the new level cap after the recent benchmark test. It was only the tiniest of teases, though, so we asked the producer and director of Final Fantasy XIV, Naoki Yoshida, about everything that goes into making and continually polishing the MMORPG's job roster.

Currently there are 19 different battle jobs to choose from, one special job, three gatherers and eight crafters, with Dawntrail adding two more combat jobs and promising another special one further down the line. That's a lot of skills and mechanics to keep on top of, especially as each job needs to be adjusted every time the game's level cap rises for a new expansion. Sometimes it's just a case of adding new abilities, but other times a job will need a complete overhaul. For example, Summoners originally had a separate hotbar to control their pets, but this was changed in Endwalker to become more streamlined and easier to use. But how did the developers decide to make such a drastic change?

JOB CENTRE

"When it comes to generally making the decision to overhaul a job, I think there are two variations," Yoshida tells us. "The first would typically be when we've created a job and the mechanics of the job become quite old. And when we look at it after the development team has gained more experience and compared them to the new jobs which the development team are creating. In those kinds of cases, when we can see that the mechanics of the job are too difficult, they would [also] be too difficult for the dev team to update. It becomes so difficult that it's difficult for the players to play. So in that kind of a case, we would make the decision to carry out an overhaul."

"Maybe there are so many skills that there are not enough buttons on a gamepad to accommodate them."

With each expansion come new skills, but adding them presents fresh challenges. "The second variation is when we increase the level cap and we look at an existing job and it gets so many actions – so

1 New girl Wuk Lamat shows off her warrior skills with a new shielding technique. 2 Summoner received a huge overhaul at the start of Endwalker. 3 Botanists will have a lot of new pastures to gather from. 4 The crafting jobs can look even scarier than the combat ones.

4

3

many skills – that it becomes difficult to play on a gamepad," Yoshida adds. "Maybe there are so many skills that there are not enough buttons on a gamepad to accommodate them. In that case when there's no more expandability for the existing job, we would go down the route of doing an overhaul, and by going through that overhaul process, we kind of improve the expandability for the job. Although having said that, generally the jobs which would require quite a big overhaul in general are low. We don't have many of them now."

Of course, the devs don't only have to re-evaluate older jobs, they also need to craft new ones. Dawntrail will see Pictomancer – a caster class that uses magic paint to attack – and Viper – a dual-wielding melee job – added to the roster, alongside the special job Beastmaster further into the patch updates. Creating new combat jobs takes a lot of consideration; developers need to think about how they might adjust classic Final Fantasy jobs for an MMORPG and how they'll affect party composition in raids, and so on . It's not a straightforward process, and that's especially true for non-combat jobs.

"At this point in time, we don't have any plans for increasing gathering or crafting jobs," Yoshida says. "The reason is quite simple – we have all of the basic gathering and crafting classes, and if we were to add more, I think they would be more of a niche thing."

MAX CRAFTING

Crafting a new job can create a cascade of development concerns. "Firstly if we were to take an example of a gatherer and we think about collecting something from the world or collecting something from nature, we could have the idea of maybe how about cultivating crops and gathering crops? When we think about, okay, we could potentially add a farmer, but if we

Who needs fire or lightning when you can throw fish at your enemies instead?

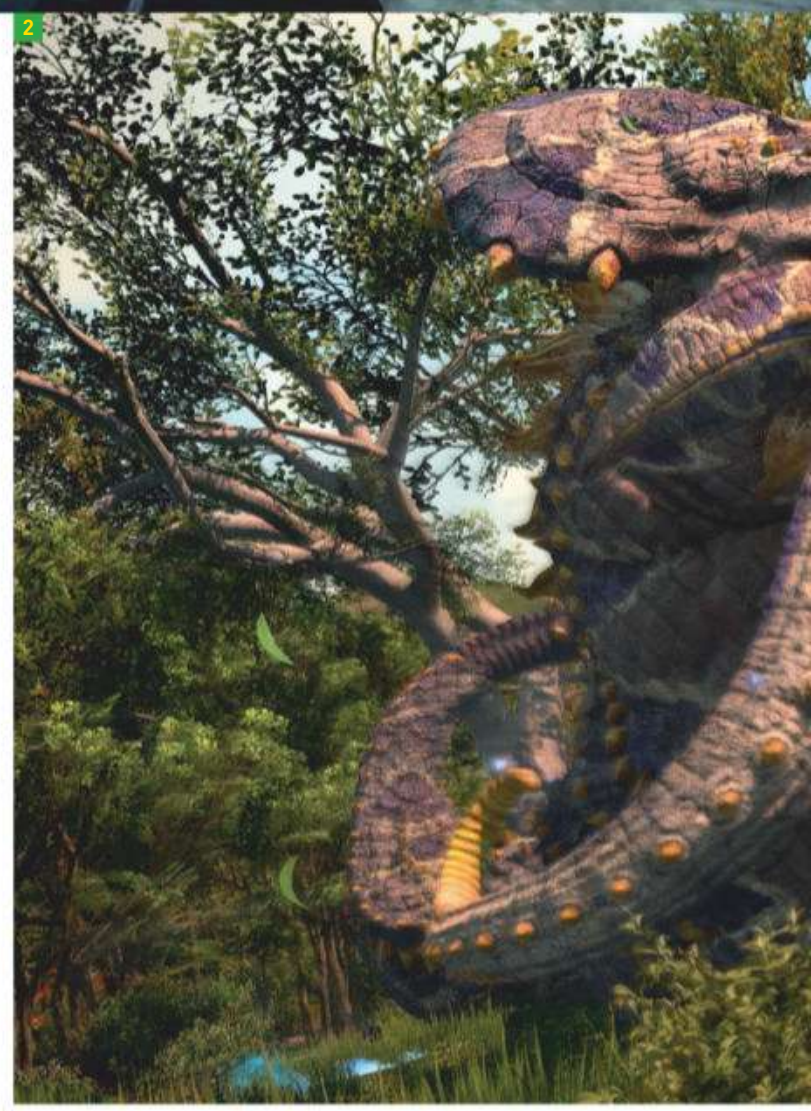
1 Squall from FFVIII would be proud of all the Gunbreakers in FFXIV. 2 We don't want to live in a world where octopi fight on land.

» are going to gather those crops, we need to create those crops in the first place. Then to create those crops we would need some space to use. And then when we think about collecting those crops, we could think, well, there's Botanist, so wouldn't it just be fine to use that?"

Clearly there are a lot more aspects that need adjusting to accommodate new jobs than it might seem on the surface. "When we go through that process of considering getting more jobs, it becomes difficult to clearly differentiate between the gathering and crafting jobs," Yoshida continues. "And when we think about the term 'crafters' as well, I come to the same conclusion. When we think about all of the things players need for living out their lives in Final Fantasy XIV, the current crafters in the game can already create all of those – things to wear and things to attack with. They can create armour. Then, you know, there are people who work with leather, and even for things such as food, we have [Culinarians]…

"For example we could think maybe, 'okay, let's just force our way through and add some mount crafters'. But if we do that, then what would happen to the existing mount rewards? If we potentially create that mount crafter, that craft is going to affect the sales of people who get the rewards from the existing content. So I think, you know, when we add a new class, it's not necessarily the case that people will be glad that we added it

"We could have a brewer who brews alcohol in the game, but then what do we do with that alcohol?"



Blue Monday

How special limited jobs can add a new dimension to play

While you can fight however you like in Final Fantasy XIV, and take part in Raids as you wish, there is one job that is not like the others: Blue Mage. Billed as a 'limited job', the way it earns its abilities and how they can be used are completely different to everything else in the job lineup.

Blue Mage itself is a classic Final Fantasy job, first appearing in FFV, but unlike normal jobs where you learn new skills through levelling, you need to defeat certain monsters to steal their abilities and add them to your repertoire. The Blue Mage in FFXIV works similarly – you're given a spell book and need to fight different monsters to learn their spells. It offers a fun approach to standard fighting, and a wealth of spells to learn allowing you to customise how you play. You can learn 1,000 Needles from a Cactuar, how to self-destruct from a Bomb, or even how to throw a sardine at your enemies, making for some truly chaotic combat encounters.

This is why Blue Mage can't be used alongside the other jobs when queuing to play a dungeon with other players; its spell list is so vast that it doesn't fit into the typical tank/healer/DPS party makeup. You can choose which spells you want for your hotbars to fill in a little bit of each role, utilising healing spells, self defence buffs, and attacks to fulfil all of the roles at once. There are lots of job-specific rewards and even a specialised mode where you can party up with other Blue Mages and cause utter mayhem in the Masked Carnivale challenge.

The upcoming Beastmaster class in Dawntrail will also be a similarly special job. With how ridiculous and funny Blue Mage can be, we're excited about all the potential chaos we'll soon be able to cause across Eorzea, as well as getting the chance to master a whole new way to play.

because the new class would take away things from existing classes.

"Unfortunately, it's the sort of situation where people would not be happy. I would like to say that it's not the case that I have made a conscious decision not to add new classes. It's just that I feel that currently we cannot add new classes. So whenever I think about it, I cannot find any good, ideal solution."

That doesn't mean that Yoshida has stopped thinking about it, though – new ideas and approaches always pop up. "To give another example, we could potentially maybe have a brewer who brews alcohol in the game but then I would have to think, what do we do with that alcohol? So if you would drink the alcohol, you would get a debuff to your character. That's not going to help you much in battle," he jokes. "So I think if we had this brewer in the game, there probably wouldn't be much of a bright future for that alcohol! I think that's the current feeling that I have on the topic at the moment."

While we may not be getting any new crafters or gatherers in FFXIV any time soon, seeing just how much thought and care goes into making new jobs has made us even more excited for Dawntrail. We can't wait to cross blades as the Viper, and cross brushes as the Pictomancer – yet more jobs to fill out our packed adventuring CV. ■

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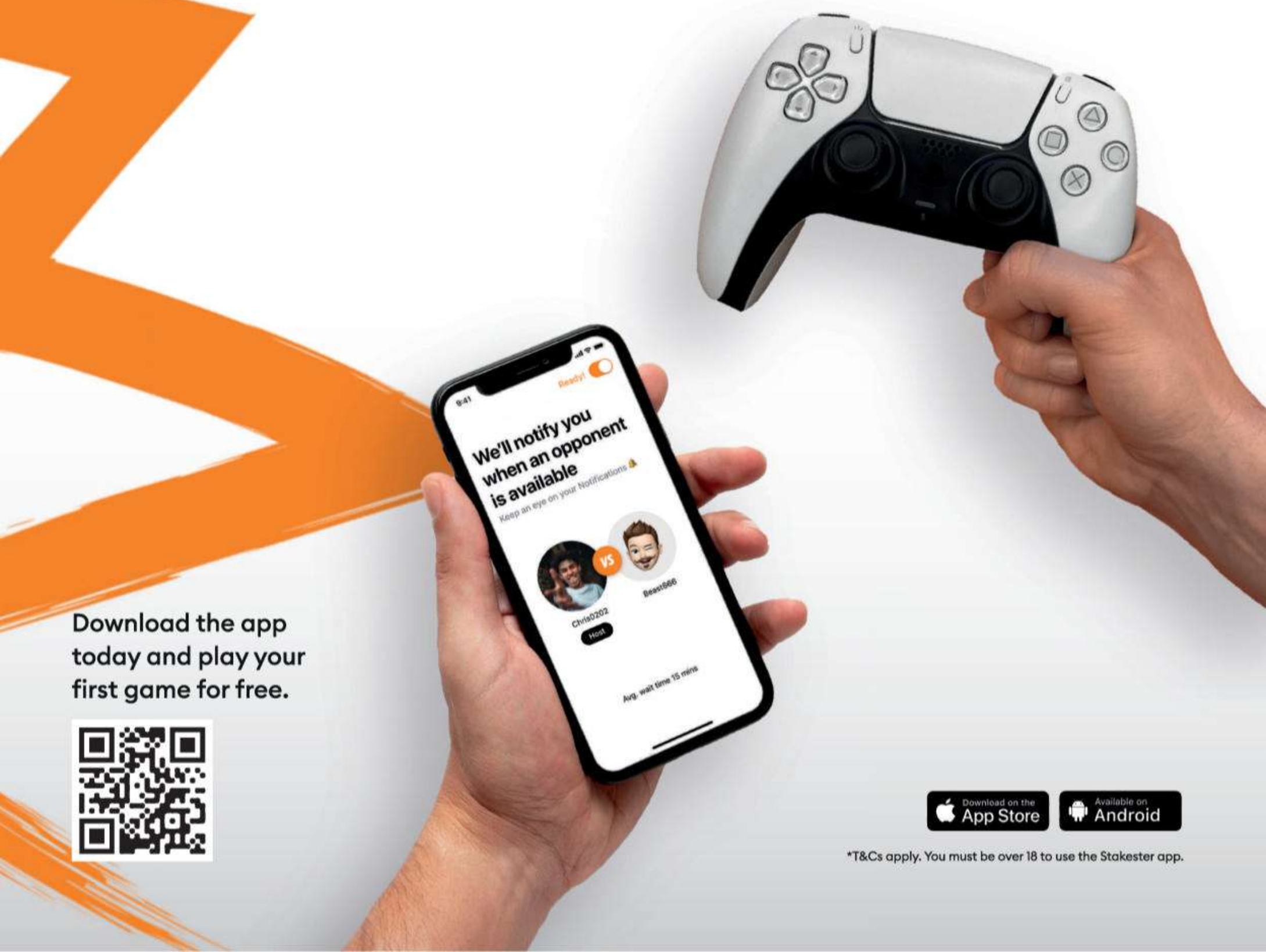

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"FIGHT TASTY SEA MONSTERS."

092 Dave The Diver

086 Sand Land

Tanks for the adventure, Akira Toriyama

HIGHLIGHTS

STELLAR BLADE 076 | GROUNDED 080 | FINAL FANTASY XVI: THE RISING TIDE 082 | ANOTHER CRAB'S TREASURE 084 | PLANET OF LANA 085 | EIYUDEN CHRONICLE: HUNDRED HEROES 088 | TALES OF KENZERA: ZAU 090 | DAVE THE DIVER 092 | UMURANGI GENERATION VR 094 | ANIMAL WELL 096 | LET'S! REVOLUTION! 098

Stellar Blade

Fresh off the assembly line

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £69.99
ETA Out now
PUB Sony
DEV Shift Up
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 30+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Customisable subtitles; multiple difficulty sliders; QTE assists; hints; auto-loot; motion blur and camera shake options; adjustable camera sensitivity; centre point toggle; colourblind options; fishing assists; and more

Just a little bit of thirst never hurt anyone. Unfortunately, here, we are absolutely parched. You play as Eve, a sword-wielding… android? Cyborg? Augmented human? It's not immediately clear, and the story spends a considerable amount of runtime playing keep away on this point. Anyway, Eve descends to what's left of Earth in a futuristic catsuit to face the threat of the encroaching Naytibas. Naturally, the mission proves anything but straightforward, but you'll probably guess how it'll all shake out long before Eve ever enters the atmosphere.

Essentially, this is a science-fiction action RPG, but its combat blends clear influence taken from the Souls series as well as the hack-and-slash genre. Fights see you both studying enemy attack patterns, looking for your opening, and letting loose on some extremely flashy (in every sense) moves. You start out with a hi-tech blade (which Eve improbably stows in her hair while exploring), trading basic blows with ▢ alongside heavier hits on △, both of which can be combo'd together in a flurry of swipes and seam-straining split kicks. It's a fun rhythm to mash out, though even on the easiest difficulty setting (which you can switch to from the in-game settings menu at almost any time) you'll still need to pick your moments for dodges on ○ and parries on L1. String enough perfectly timed parries together and you'll open up the bigger beasties to a gnarly Retribution attack on △.

SOUL SURVIVOR

It's an approachable soulslike rhythm, made even more accessible thanks to optional QTEs that concretely clue you into the window of opportunity for perfect parries and dodges. However, much of the fun of combat isn't so much about getting to grips with these fundamentals and mastering them over time as it is the sheer amount of showy toys it throws at you. L1 and later R1 too offer loads of special skills on the face buttons, for

Despite its gravity-defying artwork, Stellar Blade's story is caught in the gravitational pull of a post-apocalyptic Earth.

> Ultimately there's little here we've not seen many times before.

1 Boss bouts require slightly longer term strategising, setting the scene for where perfect parries and dodges matter the most. 2 The desolate world is stuffed with collectibles. Few are worth finding, with these cans and select chapters of racy romance Plastic Hearts topping a short list. 3 You can never quite escape that feeling of déjà vu. Stop us if you've seen this train carriage setup before...

either starting off strong or ending your combo with a dramatic full stop. Eve also eventually enjoys a powered-up form that we're not going to spoil beyond saying it has little care for combat utility, instead strictly adhering to the rule of cool.

NOT THE SHARPEST

This blend of genre influences extends to the game's structure, with mainline missions set within both open areas and more traditionally linear levels. An early switch-up sees us sequestered in a subterranean dungeon in which, due to some very silly sci-fi reasons, we can't use our sword, instead leaving us to rely on a wrist-mounted firearm for a shooting gallery that liberally borrows from the fleshy halls of action horror. Sure, the scares are cheap, but the first of these dungeons proves a welcome change of pace.

The second time around, however, this twist leaves us feeling a lot less generous, especially as enemy placements get downright *mean*; though we diligently check our corners, too many body horrors hit us with nigh-unavoidable grab attacks. And that's without even mentioning these dungeons' particular puzzles – while all fairly straightforward platforming challenges, they're rendered needlessly frustrating by movement controls designed for open areas rather than precise jumps.

Though we respect the developer's willingness to switch things up at regular intervals, ultimately there's little here we've not seen many times before. From grimy abandoned labs to yet another sewer level, the more open maps aren't much better. Called the Wasteland and the Great Desert, these two zones pose the question, 'Which shade of browny orange do *you* prefer?'

Still, we spend many hours trekking back and forth, hoovering up side-quests that all lead back to the hub city of Xion. Early on, these optional objectives tell bleak tales of survival that do little but show us what we already know about life in Xion, but sticking with them reveals a surprising amount of charm that's all Stellar Blade's own. For one example, there's enigmatic resident Kasim – who insults Eve to her face the first time they meet. However, after we retrieve a few stolen tools on his behalf, he reveals himself to be the city's foremost hair stylist. Not something to be sniffed at in a dystopia.

Eve is a warrior who scissor kicks and flips all over the place, but expresses no opinion.

DRESS UP DARLING

Side-quests unlock a surprising wealth of cosmetics like this, from glasses and earrings to a wardrobe's worth of nanosuits, all easily unlockable through regular play rather than cordoned off behind a DLC paywall. 'Refreshing' doesn't quite cover it – they very purposefully have not been making them quite like this any more. Styling choices do tend to lean towards the questionable, but you're bound to find something you like. Mercifully, Eve's unlockable style extends slightly beyond far-future talc-and-shimmy fashion – you can even don a pair of jeans and

4 Stellar Blade poses an important question: what if soulslikes had wrist-mounted cannons?
5 Eve's movement is better suited to sprinting than platforming.
6 Combat is fun thanks to a generous amount of spectacular skills.

leather jacket and call it a day if you want to.

Unfortunately, as flashy as it is, Stellar Blade suffers from a chronic identity crisis. First, Let's talk about Eve's cans – the 49 collectible chilled drinks scattered around that serve as relics from the world before. Eve strikes a triumphant pose when you find one, but this is more of a developer wink than any actual characterisation.

Eve is a warrior who scissor kicks and flips all over the place, but expresses no opinion on the ridiculous get-ups you put her in, and does not seem to even know she's sexy herself. Despite spending many hours sprinting in this capable space warrior's shoes, we are left with little sense of Eve herself due to lacklustre writing and voice direction that seemingly kept demanding, 'No, *more* stoic.' This is a baffling choice for a few reasons, but especially when compared to one of your constant companions, bubbly engineer Lily Artemis II, a presence we enjoy but whose voice talent seems to have been given the note, "That was great, but could you do it even more like a children's TV presenter?"

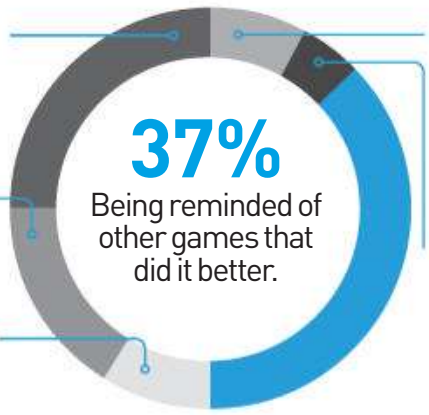
Despite the camera's leering insisting it is so, we can't really call this a 'sexy' game – or one with much personality of its own at all. Too often we'll venture to a new level or open zone, and our excitement will be tempered by the reminder of better games that did it first. Bayonetta sashayed so 2B could run, and though Stellar Blade clearly cribs from this legacy, copying that homework has ultimately taught it nothing.

A game that copies the ARPG masters – but isn't as interesting. Souls-infused combat and a massive unlockable wardrobe are what keep us coming back. Jess Kinghorn

6 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: STELLAR BLADE



25% Ignoring your gun until the action horror dungeons convince you to get trigger happy.

16% Throwing everything you have at a lowly mid-boss.

9% Pondering if a dungeon calls for a cosy knitwear vibe.

8% Loading up on side-quests in the hope it'll net you just a few wardrobe pieces more.

5% Wishing the collectible text files said more beyond, "*Blorp! *'s bad, man!" over and over.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

ADAM
This lad offers mission support via drone. Does he know more than he's letting on?

ROXANNE
They say this info broker is a snake – but she only has eyes for Eve.

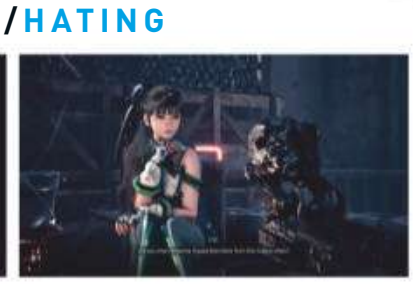
RAVEN
Another airborne squad member, she's left a breadcrumb trail for Eve to follow.

SECOND OPINION ROBO COP

Don't make the mistake I did and spend hours on Normal mode playing this like a mediocre soulslike. On Easy, it's actually a fairly breezy and fun hack and slash – and feels all the better for it. A good thing too, as otherwise there's really not much to this, too derivative in design and lacking in characterisation to have much of a personality beyond mashing on foes. Which is fun enough. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

LOVING/HATING

SICK THREADS
Though a mixed bag, with some bizarre combinations, Eve's unlockable wardrobe keeps us coming back for more.



OPEN UP
We wish there was just a bit more to Eve as a character, but a totally uninterested script holds her at arm's length.

IS IT BETTER THAN?

Stellar Blade is no improvement on fellow ARPG Nier: Automata's combat system.

Though far more technically stable than infamous PS3 release Bayonetta, Stellar Blade is less fun.

Stellar Blade's world fails to tug at our strings in the way puppet soulslike Lies Of P's did.

Grounded

Oh no, not another game full of bugs on release

There's much to like about this game, but one of the best things has to be that your teen of choice, upon awakening with amnesia in a box in the garden to find that they've been shrunk to the size of a particularly small ant, acts as surprised as if they'd opened a packet of crisps and found some crisps inside.

Grounded was originally released in Early Access back in 2020, and since then has been expanded to a full release with plenty of updates on top. The good news is that as PlayStation latecomers to the party, we get to enjoy the full, polished product from day one, with the bugs the developers didn't intend to include helpfully eradicated. The bad news is that the game suffers from an issue common to games initially released in Early Access, in that much is poorly explained to those who didn't spend years providing feedback and watching the experience evolve.

One of the best examples of this that we stumble over is when we need to find and enter an underwater area. We're given an idea of where we should be looking for the location in question. What we *aren't* given is the instruction to find and analyse some very specific materials in order to build some very specific gear that allows us to breathe for (a lot) longer when submerged, which is essential if we're to progress. We have to put the game away and wander around the internet in order to discover that little detail.

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £32.99
ETA Out now
PUB Microsoft
DEV Obsidian Entertainment
PLAYERS 1-4 (online only, no matchmaking)
LENGTH 25 hrs approx (story)
ACCESSIBILITY Range of gameplay modifiers; arachnophobia options; adjustable autosave interval; tutorials on/off; adjustable depth of field, gamma, and motion blur; vibration on/off; invert Y and X axes; sprint hold/toggle; adjustable field of view and look sensitivity

SHRINKING FEELING

Your goal, of course, is to return to your proper, human size. You do this by finding and exploring the experimental labs that are hidden across the garden, with the help of an exposition-spouting robot who asks you to bring him special computer chips from these labs. The survival and crafting elements mean that you're harvesting resources (including parts from the bugs that you kill) to build better weapons and gear. The fine detail of precisely what you need to collect and where you need to go is often unclear, not helped by some confusing level design. Expect a lot of trawling through wikis and guides in order to progress.

Two main things enable Grounded to maintain its appeal. The first is that the fundamental 'Honey I Shrunk The Kids' idea of a miniature world is captured wonderfully. It's a very pretty game, and using a crafted weapon to fight off spiders that are trying to squish *you*, while blades of grass tower above, offers a brilliant sense of place.

Most things can kill you quickly in the early game, when you're still getting a handle on the mechanics and trying to unlock recipes for stronger armour and better weapons. Your dropped resources are left in the world, Dark-Souls-style,

> The 'Honey I Shrunk The Kids' idea of a miniature world is captured wonderfully.

1 It pays to be koi around this carp; it can kill you in one hit. 2 You'll find unfriendly hovering robots in the labs, and some can hurl electricity at you. 3 You can stave off thirst with dewdrops or drops from cartons and cans.

only they persist and you can recover them at any time. You get to keep your armour and weapons, which softens the blow somewhat.

GETTING ANTSY

The second thing that holds the experience up is the superb level of customisation on offer (though be warned, anything other than the standard experience disables trophies, and most changes must be made before you start a new game). Elements such as hunger and thirst rates, the amount of damage you receive, and enemy health can be tweaked or effectively disabled. You can make bugs ignore you, remove them from the game completely (handy for archnophobes), instantly unlock all recipes and upgrades, and more. There's even a creative mode where you can make your own mini sandbox or play around with the entire garden. It's an odd situation where the core curated experience is somewhat disappointing but the customisation possibilities put many other games to shame.

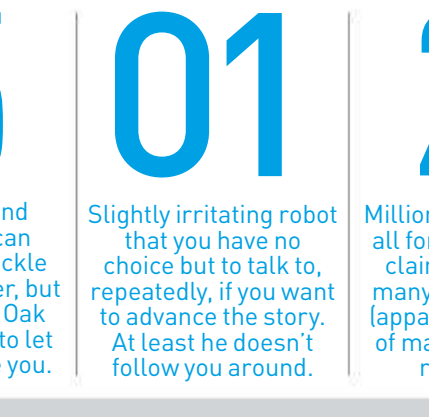
Your enjoyment will also depend, to an extent, on your play style. If you're content to dive into the base-building element and lean into a slow burn of gradually unlocking materials and recipes while mostly ignoring the story, you're likely to get dozens of hours of enjoyment. If, however, you prefer to power through the story first (or instead), you may find yourself regularly getting frustrated.

The campaign requires patience and a high tolerance for internet searches, but the creative elements are full of possibility if you're able to put in the time. **Luke Kemp**

6 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: GROUNDED



4% Killing a bug that never bothered you because you need its parts.

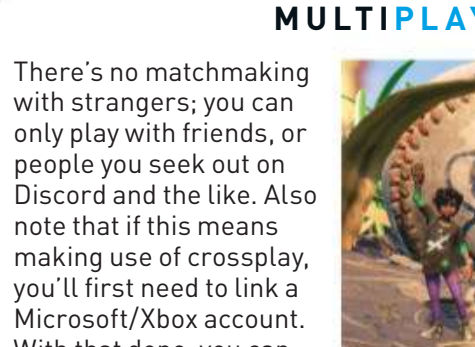
20% Trudging back to recover your dropped items, wishing there was fast travel.

15% Working out where to go, or how you're supposed to get there.

16% Hunting for food, drink, or specific creatures (or plants) to violently deconstruct.

18% Making food, drink, gear, or decorations from the remains of your enemies.

HOW TO... BOOST YOUR STATS



Dotted around the garden are Milk Molars, teeth you bust open (often with a high-tier hammer) to scoop out the gunk within that you 'spend' on upgrades. Rarer and quite often hidden Mega Milk Molars work similarly, but can provide boosts that affect a whole multiplayer party.

STATPACK

05
Labs to find and explore. You can theoretically tackle them in any order, but after the initial Oak lab, it's easiest to let the story nudge you.

01
Slightly irritating robot that you have no choice but to talk to, repeatedly, if you want to advance the story. At least he doesn't follow you around.

20
Million players across all formats, or so it's claimed. With that many people playing (apparently), the lack of matchmaking is a real shame.

MULTIPLAYER

There's no matchmaking with strangers; you can only play with friends, or people you seek out on Discord and the like. Also note that if this means making use of crossplay, you'll first need to link a Microsoft/Xbox account. With that done, you can play together in a miniature shared world.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Build a roasting spit, and then cook some juicy bug meat on it. Yum yum!

SILVER
Hit your ultimate goal and get back to normal size again! Just a silver trophy though?

GOLD
Kill a certain boss. The spiders at the beginning are bad enough, but later...

Tonberries aren't tiny here, and they're all the creepier for it.

Final Fantasy XVI: The Rising Tide

Pack your swimming trunks

Fun in the sun is what you're in for with this second, meatier batch of DLC – even if it takes place while Clive and company are in dire straits. It's set right after Echoes Of The Fallen, as the fate of Valisthea hangs in the balance, just before the main game's final confrontation. All the crystals and Eikons have been mastered… or have they?

With news that the conspicuously absent Leviathan has resurfaced, Clive ends up leading the party across the bay to Mysidia, the blighted land from which the sea serpent hails. However, it turns out to not be as blighted as once thought, instead kept healthy and hidden thanks to a witch's ancient glamour.

WATER RIDE

The tropical clime and lush jungles mean this DLC's awash with vibrant colours. It's a welcome change of pace from the base game, which only gets dourer the closer you get to its cataclysmic ending. Mysidia is even home to a hidden village, and its axe-wielding guardian, Shula, joins your company as a guide. Stoic at first, her story and that of her people – plus the reason why Leviathan is sealed away – is worth taking time over. Another adventurer in addition to Clive and friends is welcome, though beneath the surface, it's a little shallow.

INFO

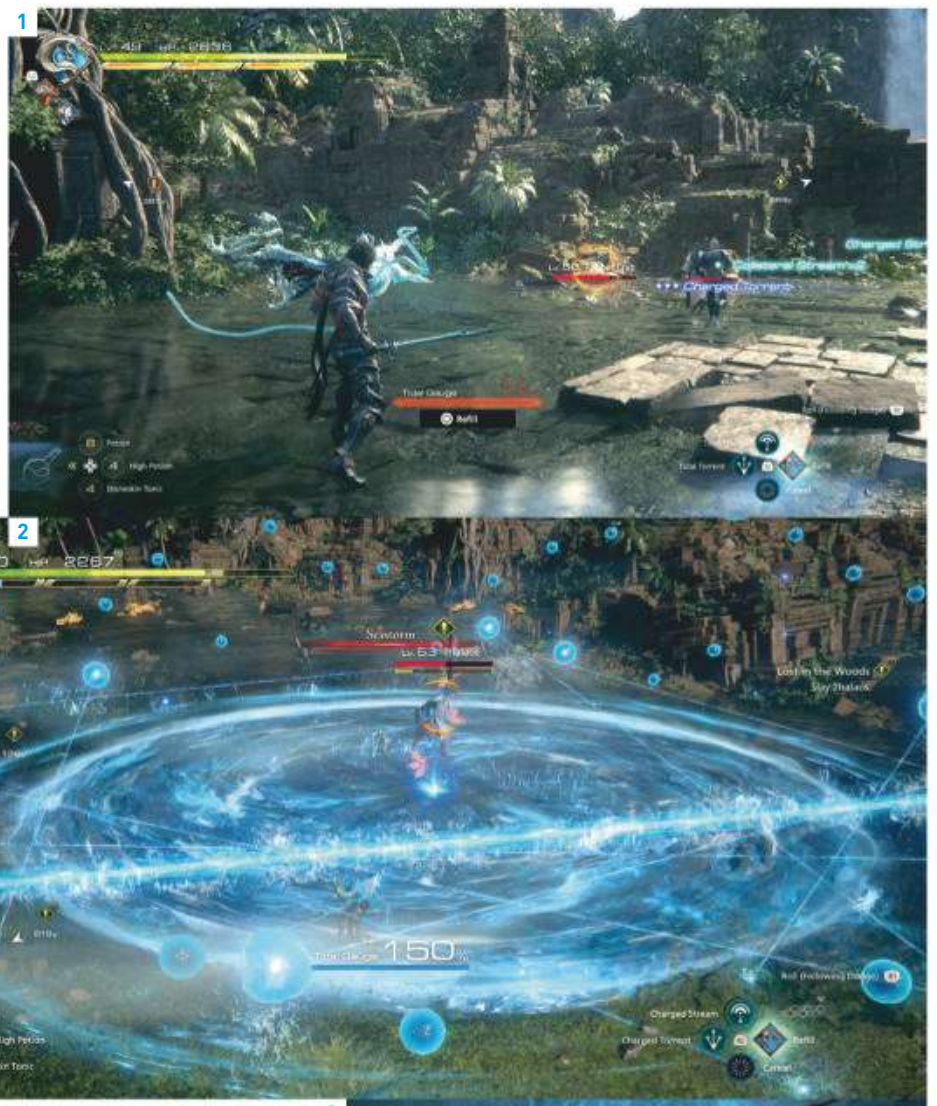
FORMAT PS5
PRICE £15.99/£19.99 (expansion pack)
ETA Out now
PUB Square Enix
DEV Creative Business Unit III
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 4-6 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Customisable subtitles; visualisation toggle for in-game sounds; customisable camera (inc sensitivity and targeting assists)

You definitely get more here than in the previous (cheaper) DLC chapter. To lay it out: there's an extra region complete with more enemies, side-quests (involving two mini-bosses), a dungeon, a boss fight, and an all-new fighting style.

Yet, as we've also enjoyed FFVII Rebirth this year, it's hard not to compare the two. Due to The Rising Tide's nature as a focussed piece of DLC, the open zones, while rather pretty, feel more corridor-like than ever. The same goes for the dungeon, which feels about as straightforward as the least fun water slide. It's no different an approach than the base game, but on a smaller scale it's hard to ignore what feels decidedly damp rather than refreshing. While the story expands what we know of the history of the world, this tale feels a bit like a footnote in the grand scheme of things. Extra challenges add replay value for the whole game, but few story side-quests stand proud above the waves beyond giving you the chance to test your mettle against a few new mini-bosses.

GUN SLINGER

What does keep things fresh as a cool glass of water is Leviathan itself. You receive its Eikonic blessing early on, meaning you can use its fighting style for most of the adventure (or barely at all if it's not your style).



1 Leviathan's skills revolve around using its maw as a water cannon.
2 Some fights here make it clear FFXVI shares some of the FFXIV MMORPG's design team.
3 As ever, the cutscenes are spectacular and the visuals gorgeous.

Attaching the serpent's head to Clive's arm, Leviathan is effectively a gigantic water gun, complete with alternate firing modes for sweeping away entire groups of enemies, and an active reload that temporarily grants infinite aquatic ammo. A double dodge complements the slow but punchy fire, enabling you to dip in and out of enemy vulnerabilities.

Oddly, this new combat style has no bearing when it comes to taking on the big boss of the DLC, which is perhaps the most in-depth and demanding Eikon clash of them all; you're forced to give your all to this giant monster battle. It perhaps asks a bit too much, as a totally uncompromising timed section puts a damper on the spectacle by making us replay it several times (possibly because the earlier content hadn't really moved us up towards the new level cap much), though we hardly want to grind to finish this quest (which *is* possible, just annoying).

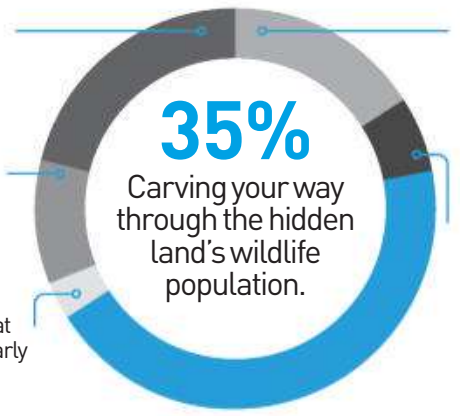
The Rising Tide proves that FFXVI's fresh take on Final Fantasy has plenty more to give. It's great to spend more time exploring the world in the company of its characters, and the combat proves it can support fresh twists. But more alone isn't quite enough to make this second wave rise as tall as the first. Rather, some of the base game's weaknesses have come out in the wash, more apparent in this diluted, slighter offering. If you can't get enough, it's here – but we'd hardly call it crucial.

It's hard to say no to a sunny adventure with Clive and friends, especially with a neat new combat style. But, slight on things to do, this isn't a must-play addition. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

7 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: FFXVI: THE RISING TIDE



10% Getting the ick from the new, weirdly human tonberry designs.

14% Trying the new set of Ultima challenges, and dying horrifically.

17% Trying to beat the final boss' gnarly DPS check.

28% Enjoying the banter between Clive and his friends, wishing he was less of a lone wolf.

6% Doing the side-quest to ensure Ambrosia the chocobo remains at your side.

HOW TO... USE LEVIATHAN

You unlock Leviathan early on, and can equip it as you would any other power. To use it, you need to hit ◎ to shift into shooting mode, making Clive strafe slowly (though his dodge is slicker than usual). ▣ can shoot target bubbles, but △ can knock groups clean into the air.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

SHULA
Mysidia's Tributary is haunted by the sins of her ancestors, and has to set things right.

PAAVAT
One of several helpful residents of Haven Village; he'll craft arms for you.

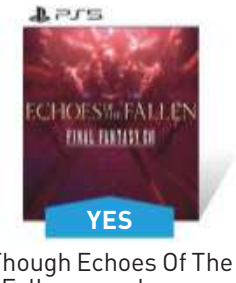
THE WITCH OF THE NORTH
Set in motion the events that stopped Leviathan in its tracks.

LOVING/HATING

TEAM BONDING
An adventure is always better in the company of friends, and we'll take any excuse to make sure Clive isn't travelling alone.

DRIP FEED
The excitement of the expansion's final confrontation is dampened somewhat by some absurdly stringent mechanics.

IS IT BETTER THAN?



YES

Though Echoes Of The Fallen was cheaper, its boss fight was better. But Tides wins out on sheer variety.

NO

It'd be odd if the DLC was better than the stellar base game, but it doesn't bring much new to the table either.

YES

Prompto's adventure was like little else in FFXV, but Tides better complements its base game.

Umami is restored as you land hits, meaning it's better to stay aggressive.

Another Crab's Treasure

Sink or swim?

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £24.99
ETA Out now
PUB Aggro Crab
DEV Aggro Crab
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 12-18 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Difficulty toggles including slo-mo; damage sliders; adjustable parry window; a one-shot kill 'gun'

Cataclysms often form the backdrop for soulslikes, but they usually have a fantastical bent. The genius to Another Crab's Treasure's premise is that the doom that comes from above is all too real: trash tumbling down into the deep as ever more rubbish is dumped into the ocean.

Disastrous? Absolutely. But it's a slow boil for the denizens of the deep who make their homes in discarded waste, use wrappers to create fashion, and trade in microplastics. That is, until the poison accumulates too much and they lose themselves to it – settlements like an entire milk carton village turning on anyone who wanders in.

Sheltered in the tide pools, Kril has to come out of his shell when it's stolen in the name of taxes by a strange, talking, shark-headed grabber toy. Tracking his home to a prawn shop (the puns flow) in the Lower Crust of the big city, he's thrown into a gold rush based on a treasure map on the back of a cereal box in order to earn it back.

CHANCE IN SHELL

Shell-less doesn't mean powerless, though. As a hermit crab, Kril can switch between any 'shells' he finds. Fizzy drink cans, tennis balls, sauce nozzles, skulls… there are loads of options to find, offering different amounts of shielding and weights that affect Kril's movement (dodging is vital for avoiding some foes). On top of that, each has powers Kril can use by tapping into the ocean's Umami. Those fizzy drink cans can shoot out a barrage of homing bubbles, for example, and that sauce nozzle enables you to spin attack. While they break after taking enough damage, you can pay to insure them, meaning you can gradually expand your arsenal as you play.

A bevy of assist modes allows you to find your own sweet spot for difficulty (and a one-shot-kill 'gun' you can strap to Kril's back is funny). These are needed, as ACT has more than its fair share of annoyances. For one thing, enemies love sending Kril flying off ledges, so turn off damage from falling into the abyss immediately. And plenty of the floaty platforming can feel iffy at best.

When it works, clashes feel pretty good as you parry sequences of attacks Sekiro-style, but a stun system requiring a charged attack during a stun window can be annoying to pull off as Kril can only charge the first hit of a combo, and can take quite a while to reset his chain. Enemies can bug too (during our playthrough, one crashes the game, and another boss disappears permanently from existence), and as well as hanging when you move between areas, the framerate of the final two areas is so bad it becomes almost unplayable. There's a lot of charm here, but this shell needs polishing.

Each shell substitute has powers Kril can use by tapping into the ocean's Umami.

The strong shell-switching hook and charming writing float to the top, while a myriad issues at launch drag down this treasure chest of promise. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

6 PLAY

It certainly looks lovely, but we've seen almost all its tricks before.

Planet Of Lana

Induces a severe case of playja vu

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £16.99
ETA Out now
PUB Thunderful Publishing
DEV Wishfully
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 5 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Scalable UI; QTEs on/off

Type '2D puzzle platformer with cute lead moppet who goes on a moving journey' into an AI and you'll probably get a photo of a cat with seven arms. But put that into an AI at some unknown point in the future when AI actually works and you'll get the opening 20 minutes of Planet Of Lana, a game that's almost impressive in how unashamedly clichéd it is. Tranquil village setting that's about to be destroyed? Check! Best friend/relative whose kidnapping drives the plot? Check! 'Puzzles' wherein you move a box across the screen so you can use it as a platform? Oh, be still our beating hearts...

You leap between chasms, swing from vines, hide in bushes until enemies look the other way, and slap yourself awake – we've played this exact adventure *far* too many times. When the game has the gall to have a flashback sequence to a boring box-moving bit that we did *barely an hour ago*, we almost introduce some innovation of our own with a 'throw the DualSense at the screen' mechanic.

MONKEY BUSINESS

However, just like in real life, things liven up considerably when you get a pet. Mui is a sort of monkey/cat thing who you rescue early on and becomes your constant companion. They're cute as a button, and bring a few new mechanics. Now you can point to unreachable areas and get them to hop up and throw vines to you (not to exaggerate, but you do this approximately four billion times), or use them as a tasty distraction when you're fleeing enemies. Squint and you could be playing The Last Guardian, assuming you're squinting during your lobotomy.

Using an animal companion to get through a game is hardly going to sweep the Most Original Game Awards, but the game isn't completely idea-free. We like the parts when we're forced to play in near-total darkness, constantly weighing up the dilemma of when to have Mui stand on light-producing switches for us and when to keep them close by. There are some pleasingly weird puzzles in the swamp that involve using plant life as a sort of sentient hosepipe to fill rivers.

Sadly, even when the puzzles do occasionally ramp up, they're hamstrung by a protagonist who moves snail-rivallingly slowly. Figuring out how you navigate a screen in a puzzle platformer should have your brain jumping for joy. Instead, it triggers the 'do a heavy sigh' synapse because now we know we have to trudge this tiresome slowpoke gradually through the motions. Planet Of Lana is yet another beautiful 2D game in an age when we're absolutely drowning in those, and simply doesn't bring either enough innovation or enough fun to stand out.

> **This 2D puzzle platformer is almost impressive in how unashamedly clichéd it is.**

Lana might be pretty but there isn't much going on under the surface. Play Inside, Celeste, or the criminally underplayed The Last Guardian instead. **Abbie Stone**

5 PLAY

The manga characters look striking in 3D with baked-on cross-hatched shading.

Sand Land

Beelzebub has a missile put aside for me, for me

One of the saddest things about the recent passing of manga legend Akira Toriyama is that he didn't quite get to see Sand Land's modern resurgence reach its peak. Far less well known than Toriyama's legendary Dragon Ball series, Sand Land is the perfect candidate for an open world videogame thanks to its sprawling setting, interesting characters, and instantly recognisable tanks.

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £59.99
ETA Out now
PUB Bandai Namco Entertainment
DEV ILCA
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 25+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Colour blind mode; screen shake on/off

You play as Beelzebub, son of Lucifer, and you're accompanied by a demon named Thief, plus a human sheriff called Rao. You're soon joined by the mysterious Ann, making for a pleasantly varied core team who grow to feel like friends (and fiends), as you set off to find the 'Legendary Spring,' a water source of which the people of Sand Land are in dire need. Activity-wise this translates to completing missions in a vast, very literal sandbox, either exploring as Beelzebub or taking control of a variety of vehicles ranging from a stolen tank to Alien-style mech suits and hovercraft. Jump bots can reach higher plateaus, while cars and bikes can cross the land at speed. Luckily a lightning-quick fast travel option is soon available for previously visited locations, so you only end up driving slowly between locations when you want to.

When you do, there's frequent, well-acted conversation between the characters. Beelzebub may believe he's the epitome of evil, but he's essentially a red version of Bart Simpson – not evil so much as mischievous. Accordingly, despite the guns and tanks, there's very little death in this game, and the soldiers you defeat with rocket blasts often just run away, fading into invisibility.

Toriyama's original story arc is adapted through charming in-engine cutscenes. Almost everyone is fully voiced too, with just a few minor NPCs reverting to text-only dialogue. This high quality starts to slip after the first five hours or so as the filler dialogue during open exploration starts to repeat (a *lot*), which is a shame because a simple 'play once' command would have kept up the illusion of real conversations instead of patently destroying it.

The pacing, though a steady clip in the beginning, also begins to slow down at the 15-hour mark, having reached a pretty convincing conclusion to the original plot, leading to another five hours of dull missions and repetitive fights punctuated by a few impactful bosses. Fortunately the story, drama, and action pick up again for the tail-end of this sandy saga; it's a mostly satisfying main quest essentially delivered in two halves, though the first part is noticeably more fun than the second.

SHAKE IT OFF

Completing side-quests and gathering resources enables you

Beelzebub believes he's the epitome of evil; he's essentially a red version of Bart Simpson.

1 Yep, that's Game Over all right. There isn't much penalty, aside from losing all the progress since your last save.
2 Your dad is the devil.
3 The irony of 'The Swimmers' is that there's no water, so they've never swum. Heh.

to modify your vehicles. You'll stumble upon rare loot for upgrades in caves and temples located a short wander off the beaten track. You can also expand your home base town of Spino by helping the characters who move in, transforming the place from an absolute dive into an impressive, bustling citadel – and it's all entirely optional. You can even furnish a room behind the Spino garage, and add decals to your vehicles, or find rare blueprints and create new vehicles with them. If you want to complete all the main characters' skill trees and fully upgrade every set of wheels (and tracks), you'll have many packed miles to go.

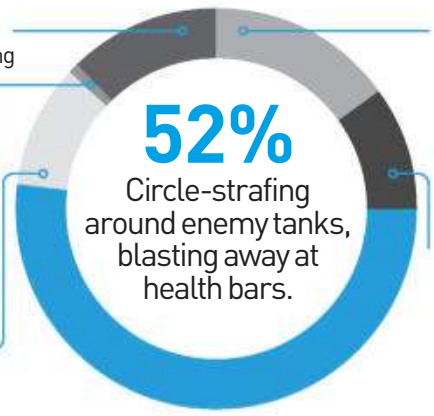
Sand Land doesn't feel modern in the way Horizon Forbidden West or Red Dead Redemption 2 do. Instead it feels more like a PS2 throwback à la Dragon Quest (which is perhaps no surprise given Toriyama's link to that series of games too). And while it combines compelling, if comparatively simplistic, stealth, vehicle combat, exploration, boss bouts, and melee combat, it does feel like it could have fitted just as well into the PSP back catalogue if the developers had made just a few compromises. Considering the same couldn't really be said of similarly-featured games like Batman: Arkham Knight, you shouldn't expect a revolution here. Still, this is pleasingly wholesome, expansive, and is essentially a playable anime written by one of the all-time greats.

You'll want to get lost in the well-realised world. No single element is a revolution, and it's sometimes a little thinly spread, but it's still a successful adaptation. **Justin Towell**

7 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: SAND LAND



12% Getting lost in the mountains, trying to find your way up to that elusive quest marker.

1% Completing QTE sections via on-screen button prompts. Aren't QTEs illegal now?

10% Fighting big, sophisticated boss battles.

15% Exploring temples, ships, and plateaus with your newly-unlocked vehicles. Might as well jump!

10% Watching the story unfold via in-engine cutscenes. They're not quite anime-quality, but good enough.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

LASSI
Says he is 'sorta like a cat' and that's all you know. Swaps secret coins for rare loot.

RAO
A mere sheriff at first glance, on a quest to find the sacred spring. But what's his secret?

SUPREME COMMANDER ZEU
Kept alive by tech, but also seems to have plenty of fresh water.

ALSO ON DISNEY PLUS

Can't get enough of the adventures of Beelzebub? There's a 13-episode anime series of Sand Land available now on Disney Plus, as well as a 2023 feature film. The latter follows the original manga's plot, while the series and game bolt a second story arc onto the narrative.

LOVING/HATING

LAND OF PLENTY
We love the wholesome humour. For example, Thief dresses as Santa Claus so he has a convincing story if he ever gets caught.

SANDY GUSSET
There are some dreary, repetitive sections in metallic corridors. The first one's fair enough, but the game really didn't need more.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Simply furnish your room at the back of the garage and pick up this to show off.

SILVER
Unlock 15 branches of Beelzebub's skill tree for this. Training results indeed.

GOLD
Own many parts of the strongest class for each vehicle type. Formidable results.

Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes

A hundred heroes couldn't save this one

Given it's the latest in a series of popular RPGs created by a strong development team, you'd expect this to have some pizzazz or at least be comfortably familiar. However, Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes lapses instead into the disappointingly familiar, feeling much more like getting stopped at three traffic lights in a row.

You know the drill: an evil empire wants to use a magic item as a weapon of war, leading to archetypal characters with nothing better to do joining your merry band in a random-encounter-addled, dismal-dungeon slogfest. It's not Eiyuden's fault everything has been done before, but that's no excuse for not having learned from any of the games that came before it.

It's bloated with unnecessary dialogue every few steps through its generic dungeons. The attempts at banter suggest it is supposed to be funny, but it's unable to inspire a chortle, each recruitable character being either dull or abrasive. With a large cast, it's natural that many characters will enjoy limited time in the spotlight, but even the main ones in your party have little going for them.

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £44.99
ETA Out now
PUB 505 Games
DEV Rabbit & Bear Studios
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 40+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Music/SFX/voice volume controls; master volume controls; vibration on/off, auto dialogue advance; separate normal/reverse options for camera tilt and camera pan during field navigation

Some battles, particularly against bosses, include Gimmicks – appropriately named cheap attempts to spice up the lacklustre combat, such as the ability to hide behind debris. Fortunately the auto-battle is solid even if you don't make changes to the Battle Plan, making it easier to grind through the experience-fodder battles while saving your attention for the bosses.

DAILY GRIND

Then war happens. Suddenly you're thrown into a totally different combat mode, with your recruited characters heading up legions in a more strategic army-versus-army showdown. War mode is later fleshed out further with unique abilities depending on who leads a unit, and adds a decent sense of scale to the kingdom-spanning story as well as making a welcome break from the smaller-scale combat. Despite this, it still falls short mechanically as it fails to make good use of the large cast. Disappointingly sparse visuals also make these grander battles boring to watch – which is primarily what you're doing.

If war wasn't enough to shake things up, there's also a hastily thrown-in one-on-one duel mode with a rock-paper-scissors-like setup, undermining what should be a poignant showdown between two main characters. Like War mode, this style of combat is also sadly underutilised in the grand scheme of things.

Eiyuden doesn't completely change direction after this turning point, but it does open up somewhat. You're put in

1 This ramshackle excuse for a base needs cleaning? Guess it's time for us to go and recruit a maid. 2 3, 2, 1, let it rip! 3 Our advice: in combat, aim for its eyes! If it has them,of course.

charge of rallying the hundred heroes (or as many as you can get your hands on) to form a resistance army, stationed in some ruins you'll build into a base. Various characters can take charge of different base facilities, helping you gain extra supplies like lumber or food, which in turn helps you to build additional facilities. Tracking down the relevant heroes for each area and seeing your base start to flourish is satisfying, though once again fails to reach its full potential as many of the facilities you can build don't seem to do much beyond offering the satisfaction of building more facilities.

WE BUILT THIS CITY

To top off the other scattered, if enthusiastic, pieces that make up Eiyuden, there are a few staple minigames such as fishing and a surprisingly compelling Beyblade knock-off. Engaging in these pastimes and gathering supplies for your growing base, as well as to-ing and fro-ing to fulfill recruitment requests for new characters, sets up a fairly chill adventure just roaming around. It could be easy to sink hours into this more casual aspect of the game if the writing and combat weren't so offputting.

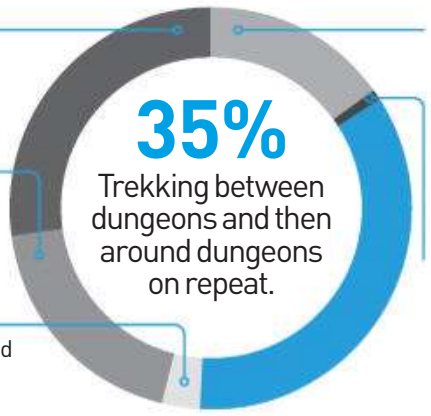
Special mention goes to the build-your-own experience afforded by the difficulty options. You can tweak things such as eliminating gaining currency from battles, which could present an interesting challenge, but why would you want to drag the experience out any longer?

Adds so many ingredients to the proverbial pot that ultimately you can't really taste any of them, resulting in a forgettable dish on an already crowded table. **Max Williams**

5 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: EC: HH



27% Realising auto-battle is the real MVP.

19% Collecting all manner of resources for building your base.

3% Trying to decipher the required ally silhouettes in the Drafting Station.

15% Experiencing "The bag can't hold any more!" and other inventory management woes.

1% After wolves and kangaroos, feeling pleasantly surprised at the shark people.

LOVING/HATING

WHERE'S ALLY?
Every time you enter a new location, you get to scout around for new pals to join your party. Meeting people is fun.

SHI'AR RUBBISH
Shi'arcraft racing is nowhere near as fun as it looks. Luckily, you don't actually have to win the races to progress.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

LADY PERRIELLE GRUM
Not afraid to put her delicate foot down against the Empire.

SEIGN KESLING
Imperial prodigy and friends with Nowa, he's torn between his heart and his duty.

DUX ALDRIC
A power-hungry noble from the Galdean Empire. Interested in Rune-Lenses.

THE FIRST SIX HOURS

1 The Watch and an Imperial unit investigate the rumours of the existence of a powerful Primal Lens. 2 The long-running recruitment drive begins, with potential new allies scattered around the towns. 3 The relatively peaceful days of the Watch are over and now it's time for war! Victory will be ours... eventually.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
There are cats, dogs, and a raccoon, often with fun names. Talk to critters ten times.

SILVER
Unlock all the development panels in the Drafting Station Huge task.

GOLD
There are actually 120 heroes to collect! But you will earn a gold for getting the lot.

Zau's easy to like, even if his game isn't always.

Tales Of Kenzera: Zau

This year's 378,992nd metroidvania

Sometimes a game has one critical flaw that stops it being an easy recommendation, such as dodgy platforming physics or the publisher accidentally filling the box with angry wasps. At other times you get a game that suffers from a thousand cuts, lots of minor irritations doing a really good job of obscuring the undeniable quality of what you're playing. Tales Of Kenzera is one of the latter. We're happy to recommend it, but if you ask us for an opinion after one of its bloody chase sequences, we'll laugh bitterly in your face while writing a '1' in that box in the bottom-right corner.

It starts well, with the kind of appealing graphics you get when EA is signing the cheques. The game is from Abubakar Salim, the voice actor who played Bayek in Assassin's Creed Origins, aka the best part of Origins. The game's told in the form of a storybook left to a boy by his late father; it's the tale of Zau, going on a metroidvania journey to try to defy death itself and get his pop back. You can predict how well that's likely to go, but the plot's got a few nice twists, with strong writing, and the voice acting – as you'd expect – is outstanding.

MAPPED OUT

It's certainly a lot nicer than all the swearing our voices produce while playing it. This is a beautiful 2D metroidvania that gives you a double jump and air dash that feel smooth as silk to use, and yet while playing we constantly feel that the game needs an extra coat of polish. It's the little things, the *endless* little things, like a platform you can't quite see until you've executed a jump, or a chase sequence so cynically checkpointed that you start looking for Beelezebub's name in the end credits (and we don't mean the fellow from Sand Land on p86).

By the end you have acquired many more navigation powers and yet they never quite build on each other enough for us to lose ourselves in the flow of the platforming (and it really isn't helped by the truly impressive Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown setting the bar so high earlier this year). Exploration is also hamstrung by the map not differentiating between areas you haven't yet visited and ones you've already explored, leading to a lot of frustrating, unnecessary confusion that often leaves us wanting to hit something.

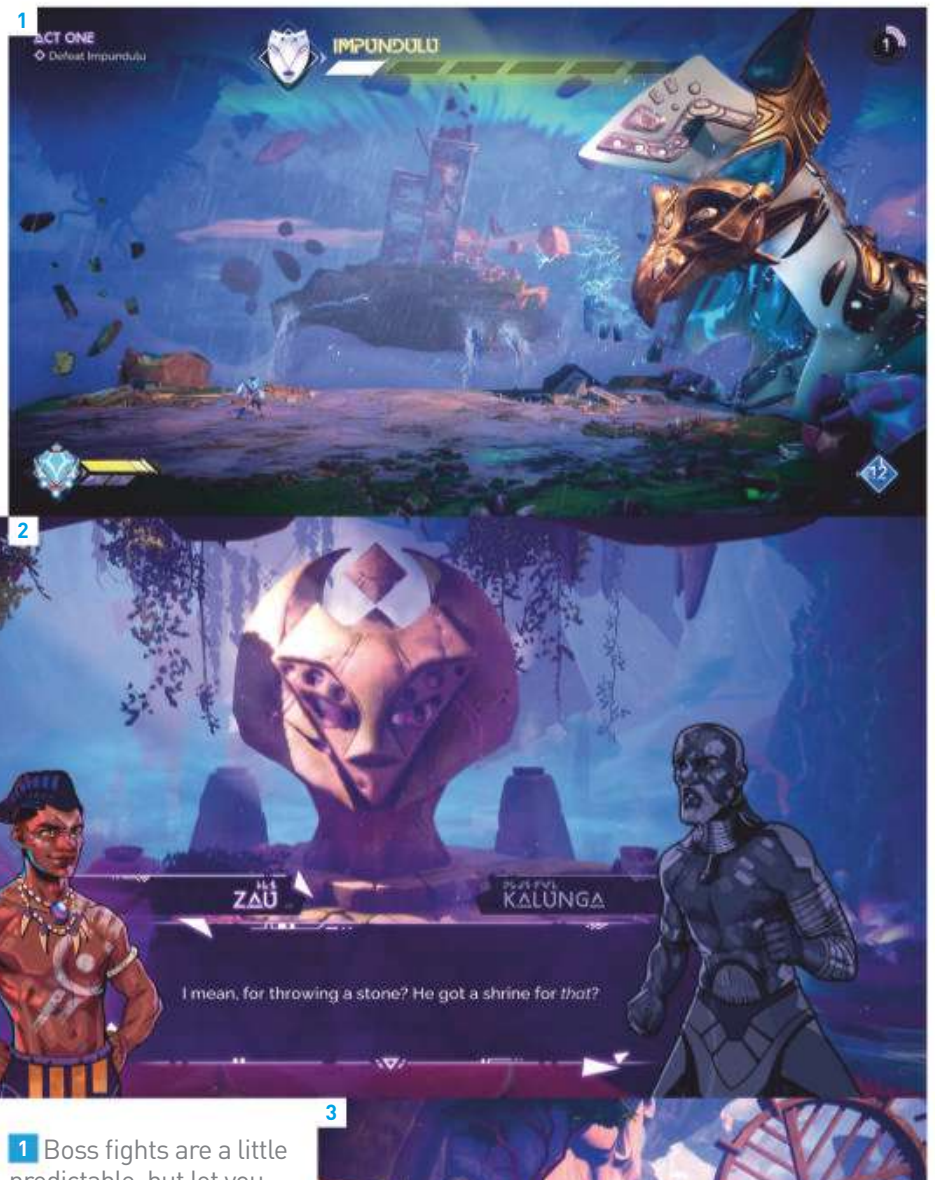
DOUBLE DUTY

Ah, but there's some good news on that front: hitting something feels *brilliant*. Zau can switch between two combat styles, one that delivers close-up strikes and another that shoots enemies from afar. Why has no other metroidvania developer thought of mixing the combat styles of Metroid *and* Castlevania before? Combat is beautifully

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £17.99
ETA Out now
PUB EA Swiss Sarl
DEV Surgent Studios
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 10 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable vibration intensity, controller aim sensitivity, stick deadzone, screen shake, camera sway and chromatic aberration

Why has no other metroidvania dev mixed the combat styles of Metroid *and* Castlevania?



1 Boss fights are a little predictable, but let you play with the outstanding combat. 2 Zau and his companion Kalunga make a great double act. 3 You'll meet some fun oddballs on your quest. Great characters throughout, actually.

animated, satisfying to execute, and gradually reveals more layers the more you play around with it. We especially love how you charge up your health-restoring power through attacking, but your over-the-top special attacks are fuelled by the same bar, the choice of what to spend it on an excellent dilemma that can flip combat encounters entirely.

A late-game series of optional battle arenas shows off just how much fun juggling screen after screen of enemies is, as we can't tear ourselves away until we've mastered every single on of them. It's great, too, to see a game and bestiary based on Bantu legends, though exactly how you tackle enemies is a little unimaginative – no prizes for guessing how you take out the large enemy who rushes you like a bull then is temporarily vulnerable when it hits a wall – but when sending them to the grave is this enjoyable, it's hard to care.

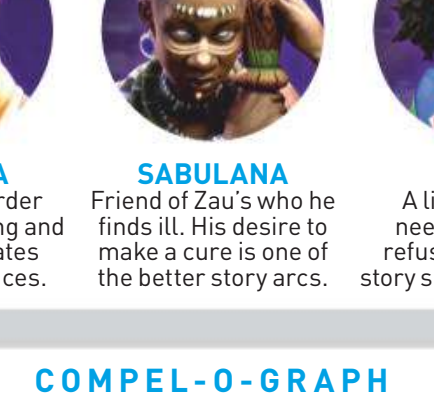
We just wish this outstanding combat weren't trapped in a game that's not nearly as confident elsewhere. Why can't we listen to the collectable story monologues while we're playing the game, instead of having to twiddle our thumbs in the menu screen? It might give us a nice break from the tiresome, wailing soundtrack that almost never stops playing, swiftly going from moving to incredibly grating. Tales has some nice ideas, gorgeous settings, and terrific fights. We just wish we could spend less time feeling like we are fighting it.

A charming but flawed metroidvania that had the poor luck to be released in a year which has already seen two outstanding examples of the genre. **Abbie Stone**

7 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: TALES OF KENZERA: ZAU



1% Yawning through unskippable slow walk story sequences.

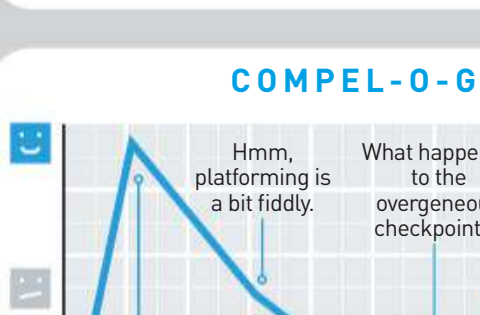
1% Freezing waterfalls to wall jump off them. Pretty!

1% Cheering after downing one of the better bosses. Huzzah!

1% Looking in the settings for how to turn down the volume on your DualSense.

1% Giggling after hitting several enemies with your death laser. Pew pew!

HOW TO... ACTIVE RELOAD



One of the purchasable powers on the skill tree lets you reload your weapon faster if you time it right. Mastering that timing is an absolute game-changer, so try to get into the habit of being able to do it even when jumping and dashing to avoid enemy hits. We promise it'll pay off!

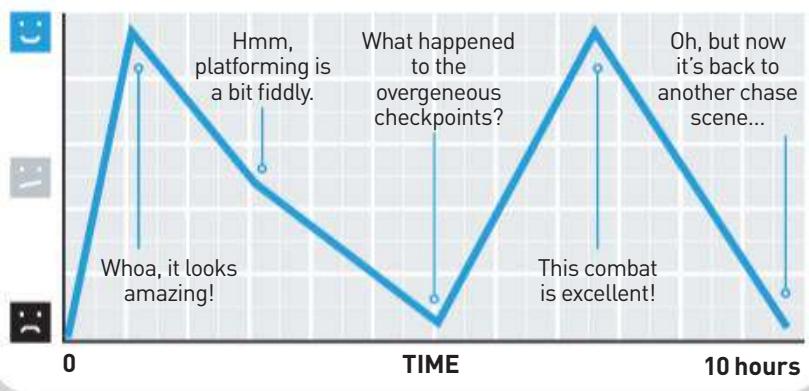
FRIENDS & ENEMIES

KALUNGA
Guards the border between the living and the dead. Berates Zau's poor choices.

SABULANA
Friend of Zau's who he finds ill. His desire to make a cure is one of the better story arcs.

LIYANA
A little girl who needles Zau and refuses to take the story she's in seriously.

COMPEL-O-GRAPH

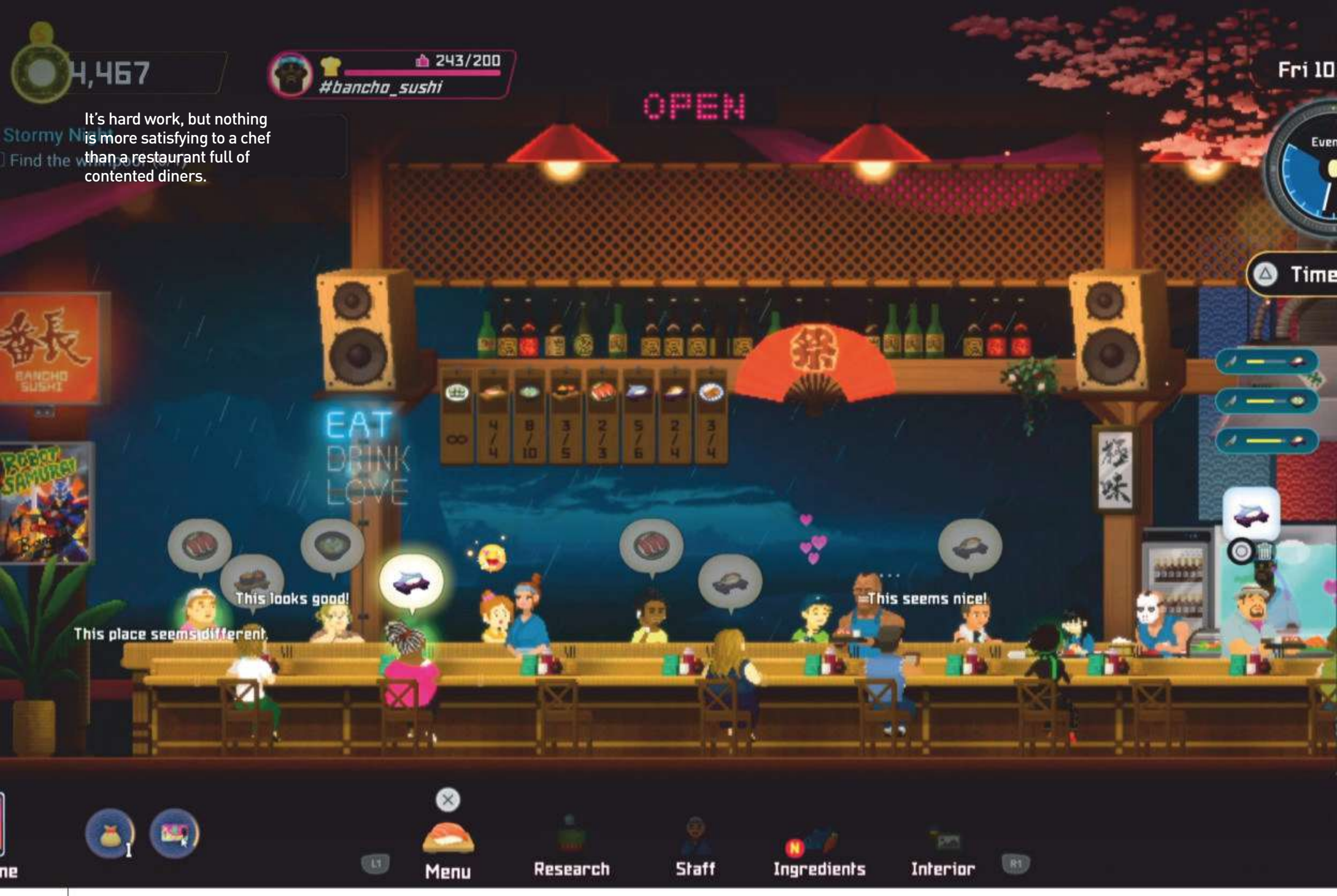

Hmm, platforming is a bit fiddly.
What happened to the overgeneous checkpoints?
Oh, but now it's back to another chase scene...
Whoa, it looks amazing!
This combat is excellent!
0
TIME
10 hours

IS IT BETTER THAN?

The combat's weaker in Ultros, but ultimately that's the better, more interesting game.

It's a close-run thing, but Blasphemous 2's combat lets it down, and so Kenzera wins this one.

Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown is possibly the best metroidvania of late, so don't take it too personally Zau!



It's hard work, but nothing is more satisfying to a chef than a restaurant full of contented diners.

Dave The Diver

Taking a gun to a fish fight

Some games just flow. You go from task to task with a sense of accomplishment, and each accomplishment unlocks something fresh for you to explore. This is the best way to describe Dave The Diver, because any comparison to the likes of Stardew Valley probably wouldn't do it justice – not least because this game's idea of farm-to-table involves shotguns.

Professional diver Dave receives a call from his friend Cobra about an exciting business opportunity: dive into the Blue Hole, a mysterious part of the sea that can somehow house marine creatures from oceans all over the world at once, to stock the up-and-coming sushi restaurant Mr Bancho. The taciturn Bancho can turn any fish into sushi, but he doesn't have any interest in management, which is why you don't only supply the ingredients, you also staff the restaurant and pick out the menu. At first you catch fish with nothing more than a harpoon and a knife, but as soon as the likes of shark appear on the menu, Dave's calibre grows with his ambitions. So yes, you absolutely shoot rifles at fish for sport.

FISH AREN'T FRIENDS

But you don't need to reckon with the ethics of any of that because unfortunately for the fish, taking them out this way is very satisfying. Twice per day you can take Dave hunting, with the evening reserved for designing your own menu and serving dishes to customers at the restaurant. Bigger fish as well as more difficult catches will probably taste better, and the more tasty fish you serve, the more popular Bancho's becomes.

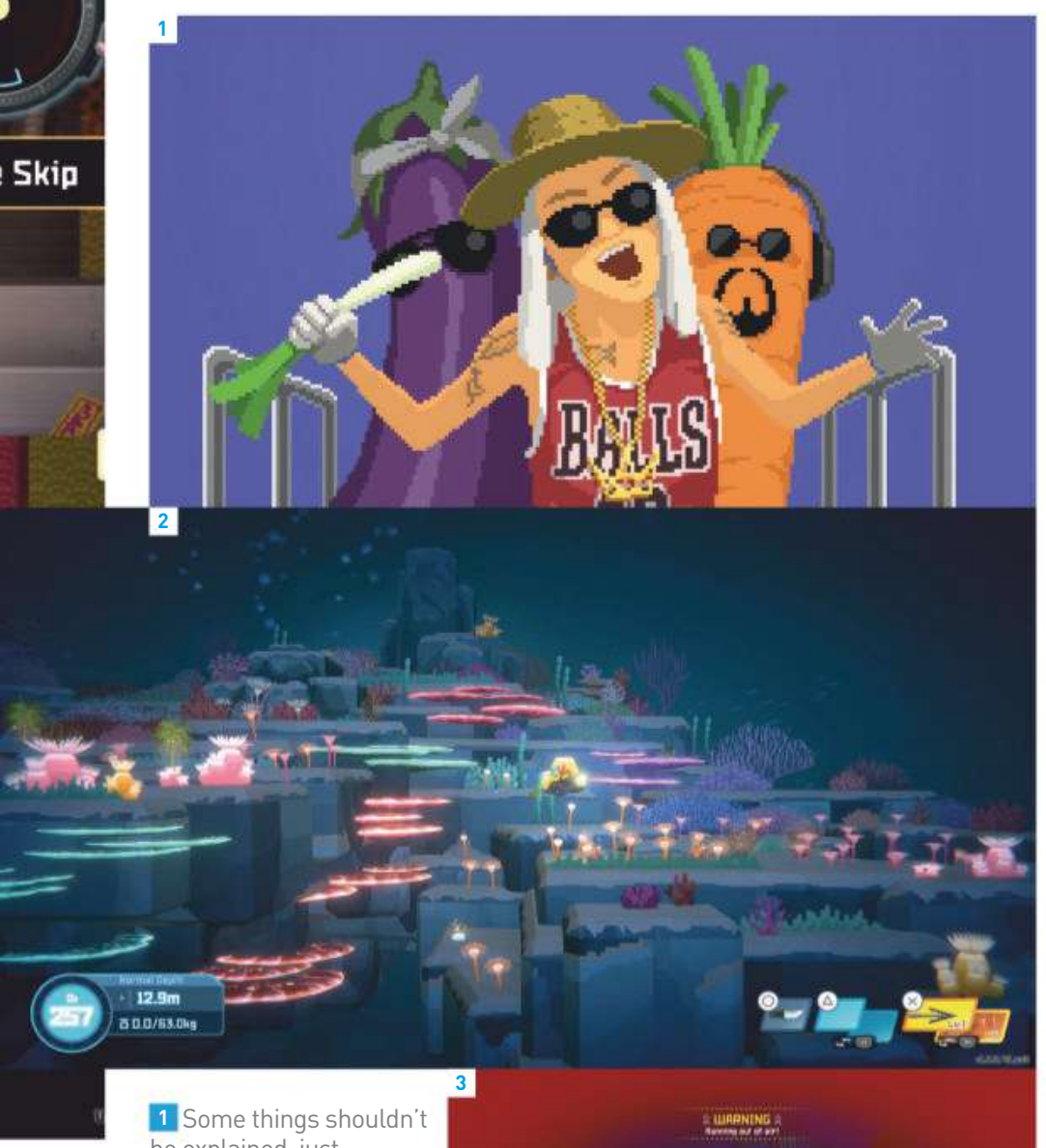
The money you make from fishing and dishing then goes into helpful equipment such as upgrades to your existing diving suit, a new one suitable for plunging deeper into the coldest part of the Blue Hole, and a bigger air tank that allows you to stay underwater for longer. Having to wait until you have the right suit to brave the different depths naturally gates your progress, and it's a lot of fun to find out what awaits you the further you dive.

However, there's much more to Dave The Diver than the restaurant; apart from the usual amusements, such as cataloguing species (there's a massive shoal to be identified) and upgrading your equipment with the help of a virtual idol nerd called Duff, there's also an in-depth mystery to uncover about an underwater civilisation and the monsters that continue to harangue its subaquatic people. Because of this, you will also fight boss battles against tasty sea monsters and run errands for sea people. In short, there is always something to do, and you'll enter a natural rhythm that makes the hours fly by – in that way, Dave The Diver

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £15.99
ETA Out now
PUB Mintrocket, Nexon
DEV Mintrocket, Nexon
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 30 hrs to endless
ACCESSIBILITY Automation for button tapping sequences

Made by people who love games, and you see that in how varied the action is.



1 Some things shouldn't be explained, just enjoyed – such as this screenshot. 2 At night, the Hole turns beautiful but dangerous. 3 Tools such as an escape pod or air canisters help make subsequent trips less challenging.

is a lot like the best management and life sims swimming out there in the deep.

LOTS OF HEART

This may resemble an indie game, but it's been made by a studio that has both the knowledge and the means to stuff it to the gills with minigames. (Mintrocket's stated aim is to "stick tenaciously to focussing on the 'fun' of a game.") Everything you do is a minigame, whether that's cutting open a sunken submarine, participating in a seahorse race, or infiltrating a secret base in a side-scrolling stealth homage to Metal Gear Solid. Dave The Diver is a game made by people who love games, and you see that in how varied the action is. It has endless runner parts, a rhythm minigame, you name it.

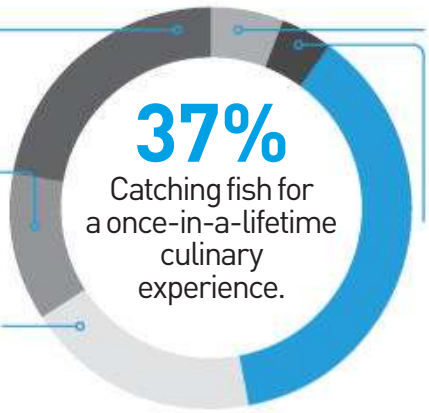
None of these side activities are particularly demanding, and while they can detract from the restaurant side of things, you can get back to the main story whenever you want – if you want to spend a few in-game days making dishes, you can. While a focus on being one great restaurant game rather than 50 simple ones would make Dave The Diver a Stardew Valley-like evergreen title, the pull of exploration is so strong it's difficult to mind too much. The next dish, the next part of the Blue Hole – every bit offers something new, making this a lovely game from beginning to end, and one that's succeeds in making you forget it's essentially one big fetch quest.

In its humour and presentation, Dave The Diver has something of a good food anime vibe – the food is important, but there's just so much more to discover. **Malindy Hetfeld**

9 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: DAVE THE DIVER



22% Collecting shells for eco points only to then get the same task again.

12% Catching roughly 1,500 fish you didn't mean to because they attacked you.

19% Risking your oxygen early on for one last catch, only to not make it back.

6% Becoming encumbered because it seemed like a waste to leave that shark meat.

4% Trying to work out how much 20% of foam is so you can serve the perfect beer.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

YOSHIE
Before she followed him to the restaurant, Yoshie used to work with Bancho at a hotel.

UDO
Journalist Udo needs Dave to bring him pictures of the most interesting species.

JOHN WATSON
In fighting you, eco-terrorist John destroys the fish's natural habitat.

HOW TO... CATCH HIGH-GRADE FISH

To be of the best quality, a fish has to be alive when you catch it. You can catch small fish with a net gun, and bigger ones like tuna with a sensor trap. You can't catch large, aggressive species such as sharks alive, though you can raise them on your fish farm if a kill drops some roe.

THE FIRST THREE HOURS

1 We've caught our first fish! Woohoo! We've also learned how to run a restaurant and, worse, a social media account. **2** This intriguing secret underwater civilisation just begs to be studied, but to move on... **3** We've got to fight a giant squid for an anime figure first, even though the kraken just tried to save on shipping.

IS IT BETTER THAN?

YES

Battle Chef Brigade has a more interesting idea to work with, but Dave The Diver's gameplay is stronger.

NO

Stardew Valley has a much bigger focus on building a community. DTD is more like a management game.

YES

While you also stock and run a shop in Moonlighter, it's a much smaller part of proceedings.

At one point we stop for a little dance with our friends, because why not?

Umurangi Generation VR

Nice to play the Generation game, to play it nice

You would, perhaps, expect a game that hands you a camera and asks you to do nothing but take photos to be about photography. And to an extent, this one certainly is. Yet as we progress through what turns out to be a story, it quickly becomes obvious that this is about so much more than the art of taking pictures.

Umurangi Generation's premise is so perfectly suited to virtual reality, and its implementation so superb, it's genuinely surprising that a VR version of the game has only been made available this year (the non-VR game was first released on PC in 2020). The camera is your ever-present friend. When you want to take a photo – which you can do at any time and any place – you just reach down to grab it, bring it up and hold it in front of your face, wait until you're happy with the framing, focus, and zoom, and hit a button to capture the moment. Just like a real camera.

You can take photos of whatever you like (and you're encouraged to do so), but in order to unlock the next stage, you have a list of specific 'targets' to capture. This might be a single object or, often, multiple objects that must be framed within the same shot. The trick is in exploring the environment to find them, then finding the right position and lens (the latter sometimes specified for the task) to get them in view.

INFO

FORMAT PSVR2
PRICE £19.99
ETA Out now
PUB Playism
DEV Origame Digital
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 3 hrs approx (first runthrough)
ACCESSIBILITY Locomotion/teleportation movement; fade/cut transitions; vignette on/off, move in looking or hand direction; adjustable individual sound element volume, turning style, and movement speed; rotate camera with head or hand; buttons/stick zoom and focus; two spray paint modes

You can fiddle with things such as colour saturation and exposure before finalising the shot, with more options added as you go. None of these things have any effect on your score; it's just about your personal preference. As the game explicitly states, there's no such thing as bad art. Your pictures are graded on the objective matter of what's in them, rather than the subjective matter of how you've captured them.

SHUTTER ISLAND

You'll unlock new lenses as you go on (zoom, fisheye, and so on, broadening the scope of your images), with more available as rewards for taking optional photos as well as the ones that are compulsory for progress.

The design of the photo bounties, both compulsory and optional, shows the true genius of the design.

Searching for your targets means thoroughly scanning your environment, and bounties lead you to view and capture specific tableaus (although there are usually multiple ways of completing them). You drink in the environmental storytelling both through your own exploration and with the help of the gently guiding hand of the developers. What begins as a sunny day hanging out with friends and taking snaps quickly unfolds into a bigger picture of war and oppression.

You finish a stage by 'delivering' the photos you take, and it soon becomes apparent

It's about art, but it's also about anger. About injustice. About protest, and rage, and rebellion.

1 You can't pet the cats. Our greatest criticism of the experience. 2 To change lenses, grab the front of your camera, cycle through, and attach the replacement. 3 We *had* to. If you see this in the real world, though, it definitely wasn't us.

why somebody might be interested in them. The world is fending off an alien invasion, yet this almost becomes background noise as it becomes apparent that the authorities are still taking the time to ruthlessly crush dissent among the populace. (If you're worried that we've just spoiled the game's story for you, we haven't – those are the basics, but there are depths here that we haven't even touched upon.)

ANGER IS AN ENERGY

Umurangi Generation is about art, but it's also about anger. About injustice. About protest, and rage, and rebellion, and how sometimes just being unrepentantly joyful is a form of protest in its own right. It chimes with the world today just as much as it did in 2020, and sometimes you need something to tell you it's okay – *right*, even – to feel angry and conflicted at the state of things.

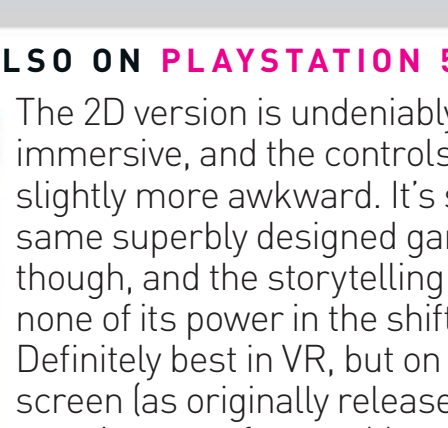
This is an experience driven by equal parts fury and intelligence, but it's no po-faced manifesto. Just look at that wonderful art style, and besides, one optional task in each stage is to take a photo of your friends, and one of them is a *penguin*. You can even add to the omnipresent graffiti by spraying some some of your own. Cathartic political messages, a self portrait, or rude pictures? All three? No extra graffiti at all? It's totally up to you. There's a story here, but ultimately, it's not quite finished. It's up to you to finish it off with your own unique touch.

If you *can* play Umurangi Generation, you *should* play it. A masterfully told story that puts you at the centre in a unique, deeply meaningful way. **Luke Kemp**

9
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: UMURANGI G VR



20% Finding a rebellious expression of anger, and instantly recognising the feeling.

15% Working out how to get everything for the bounty into one shot.

10% Enjoying simply wandering around the latest environment, camera in hand.

10% Finding something that drops another narrative bombshell in your lap.

5% Finally locating the photo bounty subject, and crying 'aha!' to yourself.

STATPACK

04
Friends you need to get into one shot for the optional photo bounty. Did we mention one of them is a penguin? How could you not snap them?

12
Colourful, interesting levels to explore and capture photos in, plus one area without objectives – but still fun to shoot – that acts as a sort of epilogue.

07
Formats (counting Quest 2 and 3 as one) now have a version of this game. Good; we've got it on PSVR2, and the more people who play it, the better.

ALSO ON PLAYSTATION 5

The 2D version is undeniably less immersive, and the controls are just slightly more awkward. It's still the same superbly designed game though, and the storytelling loses none of its power in the shift. Definitely best in VR, but on a flat screen (as originally released), it remains an unforgettable experience.

LOVING/HATING

FILTER COLLINS
On top of choosing lenses with different effects, you can make each shot truly your own by choosing from a variety of filters.

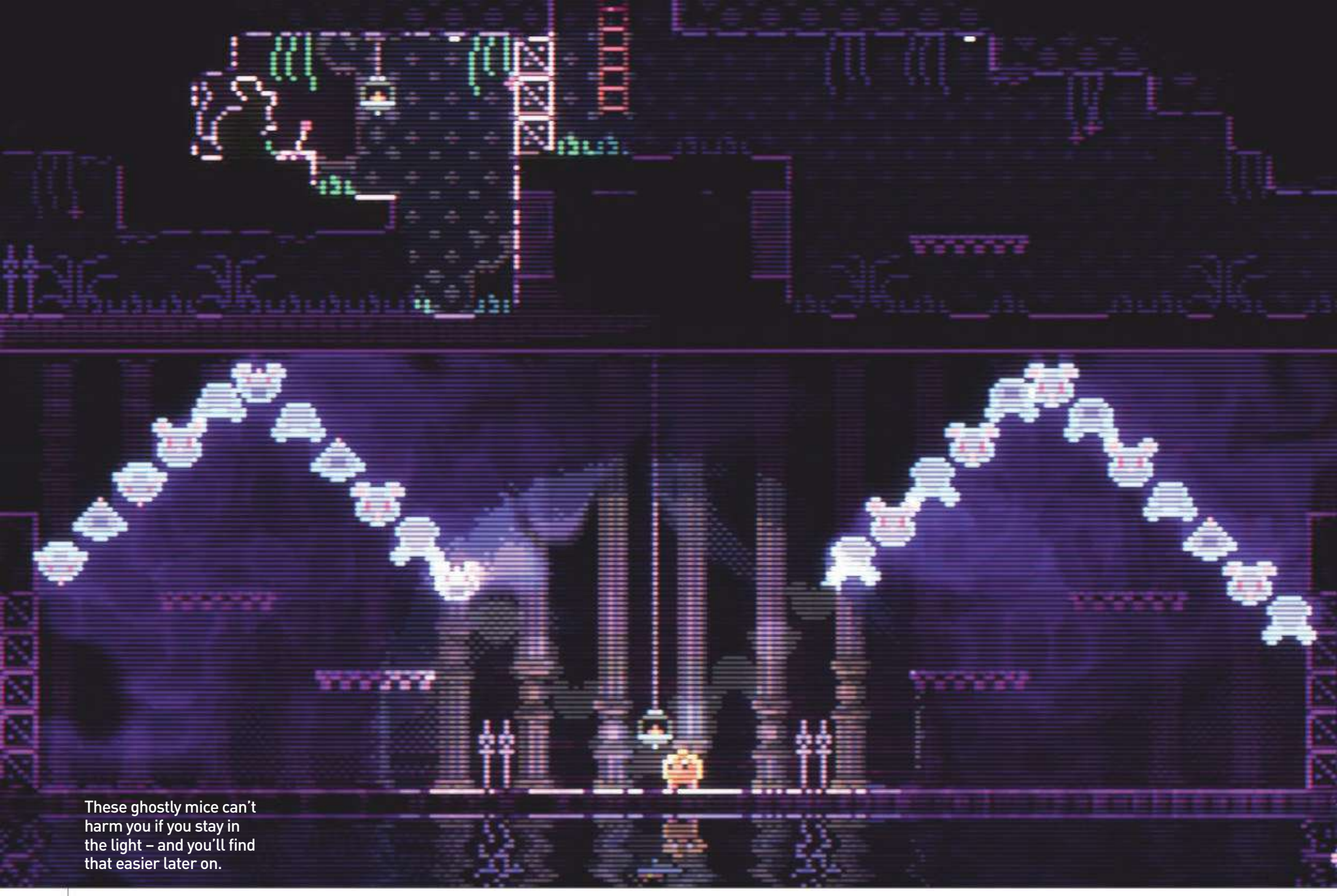
DOWNLIGHT TOUCH
We don't actively *hate* the fact that we had to search to learn what a downlight was, but c'mon devs, give us a clue!

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Complete all optional and compulsory bounties in Walled City for the autofocus mod.

SILVER
In Invasion, take a look into the distance. Now snap a picture of an epic standoff...

GOLD
Take a photo of the penguin – which surely you will! – and the trophy's yours.



These ghostly mice can't harm you if you stay in the light – and you'll find that easier later on.

Animal Well

Something burrowed, something blew (our minds)

Aha! Oh. What? Hmmm. Yes! If awards were handed out for how often games caused involuntary noises of puzzlement, confusion, shock, and unmitigated delight, Animal Well would absolutely clean up. Inspired as much by Resident Evil as Fez, solo developer Billy Basso's game is the spellbinding result of spending ages building a world and then stuffing every pixelated inch of it with wild ideas, bonkers mysteries, and brain-boggling secrets. Forget the metroidvania, we're witnessing the birth of a whole new subgenre: the Well-like. (And if that doesn't catch on, it'll certainly be Well-_liked_.)

Playing a small, unassuming blob-like creature – distinguished only by its searching eyes, each just two pixels high – you hatch out of a flower and into a compact, complex labyrinth. It's not huge but it feels that way because it's so densely packed. This place is a veritable mille-feuille: as carefully assembled as an artisan pastry, it seems sturdy on the surface, though its layers flake away if you poke at it enough.

WELL, WELL, WELL

Unlike most games of its kind, Animal Well never makes you feel like you're just hunting down Item A to unlock Door B to get your hands on Artefact C. Exploration feels much more natural. Four elemental flames give you rough directions to head towards, but for the most part you can just follow your (invisible) nose – whatever attracts your curiosity will almost always lead to some sort of discovery. Often it'll be an egg of some kind, placed inside a chest: these seem like bonus collectibles, but the environmental puzzles between you and them mean they're always fun to truffle out. And then you realise they're more important than you thought.

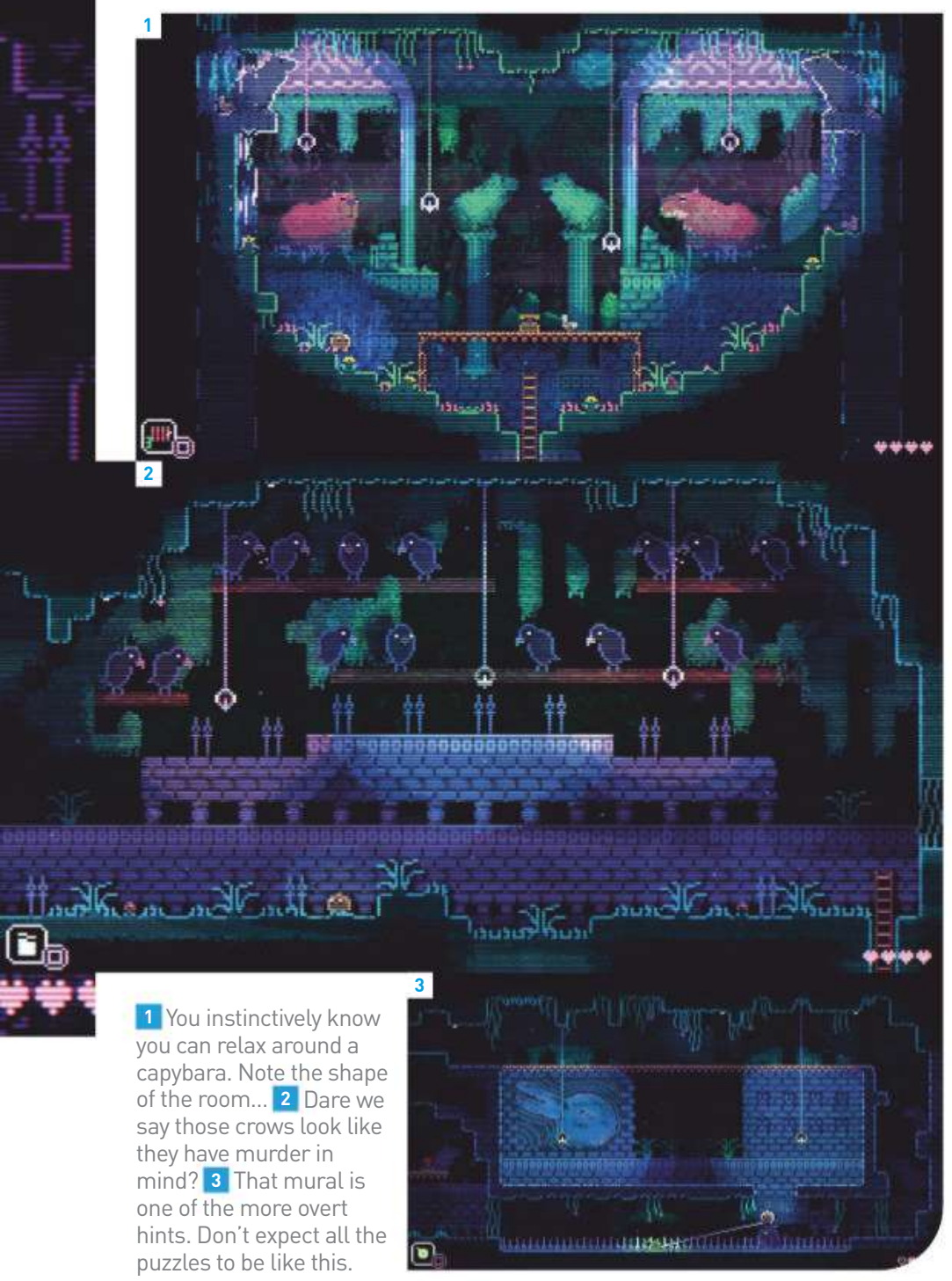
By that time you'll have filled your pockets with toys that look useless at first glance but come in _very_ handy. With a bubble wand you can make temporary platforms. A flying disc can activate distant levers. A yo-yo stretches up and around ledges to trigger inaccessible switches. They all have other functions that are left for you to discover, and a couple of hidden techniques besides: using one of these items to navigate a late-game gauntlet of spikes is one of the most satisfying moves we've pulled off in a videogame in _years_.

That's the exploration bit, but what about the action? Again, Animal Well doesn't play things by the metroidvania rule book. When you're this small, everything feels like a threat, but plenty of animals pay you no mind (some are so timid that your presence alone frightens them off). Then you'll stumble across something larger and deadlier – since there's no scrolling you won't see it

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £24.99
ETA Out now
PUB Bigmode
DEV Shared Memory
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 20+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Scanlines and flashing effects on/off; music/effects volume options; vibration on/off; swap confirm/cancel buttons

> **The survival-horror influence never stifles your desire to see what's around the next corner.**



1 You instinctively know you can relax around a capybara. Note the shape of the room... 2 Dare we say those crows look like they have murder in mind? 3 That mural is one of the more overt hints. Don't expect all the puzzles to be like this.

coming – and panic as you realise you're basically unarmed. There are ways to stun and scare, but those firecrackers are in limited supply...

DUCK FOR COVER

Running and hiding, then, is often your best option – though in more than one memorable case heading underground is no guarantee of safety. You'll blow out your cheeks in relief when you reach a screen with a save-game telephone, where the music sounds like it's being piped in from the Spencer Mansion's typewriter rooms. Yet if the survival horror influence is clear, it never stifles your desire to see what's around the next corner. You just learn to tread more carefully, and to expect the unexpected.

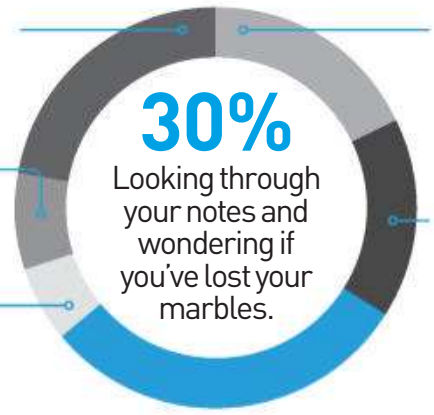
Then again, Animal Well works wonders in upending those expectations. When you reach *an* ending, you'll know it's not *the* end. There are too many dangling threads for that, too many things marked on your map that are still out of reach. And when you've grabbed *those*, you'll still have questions – ones that might have you scribbling nonsensical notes like a crazed conspiracy theorist. Hidden rabbits, secret tunes, an unlikely mode of transport, and even a puzzle that looks like it'll need the game's entire community to solve: you get the feeling that this place might just be bottomless. Call it animal magnetism: Basso's game draws you deeper and deeper to the point where you simply won't want to leave. You will say *wow*.

Moody, mysterious, borderline magnificent – this is a modern classic, an adventure that rivals its biggest inspirations without just following their lead. **Chris Schilling**

9 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: ANIMAL WELL



22% Running away at full speed from something big and scary-looking.

8% Eggs! Eggs! Eggs! Eggs! Eggs! Eggs! Eggs!

6% Legging it back to the egg room to discover your next reward.

18% Approaching something cute – and then running away when it lobs nuts at you.

16% Figuring out how to get from *here* to *there* (and grinning when you do).

HOW TO... DODGE THE DOG

Or is this pointy-eared beast a cat? We're leaning towards canine: this ghostly pest is a rather dogged pursuer, after all. The trick to escaping is first to plot out a route to the room where you grabbed the mock disc. And to give yourself a head start, you can always use the flute...

STATPACK

01
There's but a single animal here with the power of speech, left in because developer Billy Basso couldn't bear to part with the li'l fella. Aww.

64
The number of eggs you'll need to unlock the final door in the game's peacock room. The reward for achieving it? Now that would be telling...

07
The total number of years Billy Basso spent putting Animal Well together. Yes, it's a lot, but it's time *very* well spent, we reckon.

LOVING/HATING

WONDERFUL TOYS
There's nothing quite like figuring out for yourself what a new gadget does. And then realising it does more than that.

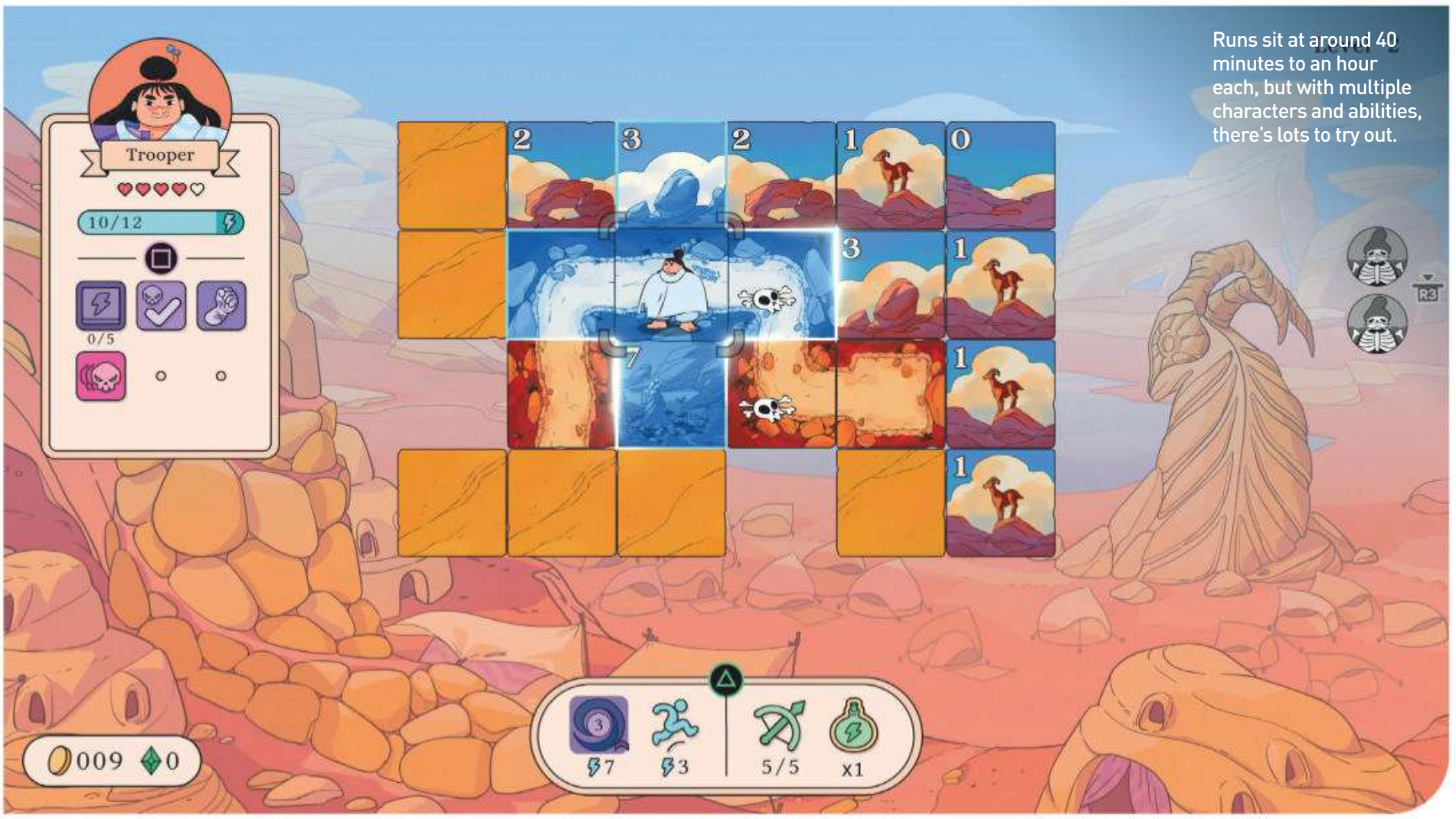
NEED FOR SPEED
Hating is too strong a word, but gating some post-game rewards behind strict completion times feels a touch unfair.

IS IT BETTER THAN?

Another Metroidvania tinged with horror influences, but Well's animals have Blasphemous II licked.

Hollow Knight's similarly cute and nasty, just as deep in different ways... can we call it a dead heat?

Now *that's* blasphemous, you might think. But honestly, play Fez and you'll probably agree.



Runs sit at around 40 minutes to an hour each, but with multiple characters and abilities, there's lots to try out.

Let's! Revolution!

Time to rise up

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £15.99
ETA Out now
PUB Buck Design
DEV Buck, Antfood
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 4-5 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Easy mode; hidden enemy indicators; toggleable screen flash effects and tile shake effects

The logic puzzles of Minesweeper have been given a glow-up in Lets! Revolution!, a turn-based strategy adventure that takes the rules of the PC legend and punches them up. It's a colourful roguelike puzzler in which you need to use the art of deductive reasoning to flip tiles and find the dastardly king. There's plenty of strategic depth here, together with gorgeous animation.

Each level tasks you with hunting down the king, who is hiding somewhere in the map. Maps are made up of tiles that are placed face-down, and your task is to flip them until you find the crowned coward. When he's been exposed, he'll flee into the next level in a cycle that will keep repeating until you end his reign once and for all.

The tiles come in road and landscape varieties, and to flip one over you need either to move onto it or to use an ability that flips it over. Tiles surrounding your character display numbers indicating how many road tiles there are around you, so you'll need to get that Minesweeper brain into gear to deduce which tiles are safe to move on and which will have the King's henchfolk on them.

REVOLTING

If you expose an enemy when flipping tiles, you enter turn-based combat with them. Enemies always occupy road tiles, so you want to approach the board methodically – turn over lots of tiles at once and you might be overwhelmed by enemies. You need to keep an eye on your health and energy, as well as find shops and gyms to buy items and new abilities.

The key to winning Lets! Revolution! is to get as much information as you can about what's lurking under tiles before you flip them. It'll put both your logical and strategic abilities to the test, right from the moment you choose one of the three player characters, each with their own special moves. For example, there's the Trooper, a cloaked warrior whose spinning punch can instantly uncover all surrounding tiles and deal one point of damage to any hidden guards. If you're after someone with more finesse, there's the Shadow, whose shtick is that they can only attack guardsmen who are concealed, so when enemies are revealed you can flip their tiles back over to hide them again, then attack without fear of them attacking you back.

Tying all these puzzle elements together are the colourful visuals and gorgeous animation. Characters unleash their attacks with incredible flair, and letting rip with a flurry of tile flipping is incredibly satisfying. Character designs are fun too, like the King – a grotesque lump of a human with giant nostrils and bulging eyes you can't help wanting to boot in the face. It all makes this a refreshing new take on a classic.

You'll need to get that Minesweeper brain into gear to deduce which tiles are safe.

Lets! Revolution! takes Minesweeper and revamps it. Its tile-flipping deduction puzzles hold strategic depth, and its lovely animation adds a welcome flourish. **Rachel Watts**

8 PLAY

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 **PRICE** £19.99 **ETA** Out now
PUB Wales Interactive **DEV** Wales Interactive **LENGTH** 6 hrs (story) **PLAYERS** 1-4

Sker Ritual

More fun than an actual Satanic ritual

Maid Of Sker was a first-person horror game that didn't even have guns when it was first released. So naturally this new game in the Sker series is... a round-based zombie FPS? It's a bit like finding out The Last Of Us Part III is going to be a cosy farming simulator. Still, it's a spinoff, not a straight sequel, and we're never ones to discourage a developer from trying something new.

Hmmm, but how new is it, really? This plays a lot like Call Of Duty's Zombies mode, only made on a much smaller budget and with enemies wearing funnier hats. You spawn in some horrible location and have to complete missions while wave after wave of nasty monsters attack. Gunplay is fine, you move at a decent speed, and some of the game's quirks even make us smile. We're not sure why the melee attack is so much more powerful than the starting gun but it's fun to execute so who cares?

It's a perfectly competent effort, then but because it's so reminiscent of other shooters that we've played in the past, it's hard to focus on the overfamiliar positives as the negatives stand out more. Escorting a goat so it can be used as part of a sinister ritual is a good, darkly comic idea – except an escort quest and a wave-based FPS go about as well together as your PS5 and a bucket of water. But even that's not as tedious as trying to hunt for four specific scarecrows in a samey-looking field full of the bloody things.

You get four campaigns, although it's tempting to count the one set in a sewer as -1, and each plays out near-identically every time, with all the main mission objectives located in the same places. On the plus side, that means we can memorise where those stupid scarecrows are, but when you perish near the end of a campaign after an hour of shooting, solving puzzles, and herding goats, the prospect of doing it all over again from scratch, with everything right where it was before, is the closest Sker Ritual comes to turning back into a straight horror game.

Like COD's Zombies mode, made on a much smaller budget and with enemies wearing funnier hats.

Not since Silent Hill: Book Of Memories has a horror series spun-off in such a strange direction. Sadly, Sker Ritual is about as successful as that game too. Abbie Stone

5 PLAY

THREE TO PLAY

PSN games you might have missed

Every month, loads of games come to the PS Store. We're looking at some that didn't quite make the cut for full reviews. This month we're having a ball with titles that serve up backhands, duels, and shuffles. We may be looking at the discard pile, but it's still a stacked deck.

After we've made such a racket with that volley of puns, it may not surprise you to learn that first up is **TopSpin 2K25**. What *is* surprising, though, is that this is the first time we've seen this series on court in 13 years – the last entry came out on PS3 – and, judging by that name change alone, publisher 2K most likely has designs on it becoming a yearly sports release. Serena Williams, Coco Gauff, Naomi Osaka, Andy Murray, and Roger Federer all appear on the roster, plus MyPlayer allows you to fashion your very own tennis superstar. Unfortunately, TopSpin has fumbled what is otherwise a satisfying serve by lobbing microtransactions left, right, and centre, in addition to requiring an always-online connection for sizable chunks of content. We're not exactly feeling the love.

Feeling wilted after that on-court action? Well, allow us to welcome you to our next title, **Withering Rooms**. Yes, the lack of a 'the' in the title threw us off too, but it'll make a lot more sense when we tell you how this 2.5D horror never scares you the same way twice. It's set in a Victorian mansion whose floor plan gets rearranged every night; each floor may offer new pointy ends for perfecting your build – or fresh fleshy foes that are eager to bring your run to an end. There's no escaping how rough this one looks at first grimace – it doesn't scream 'modern' – but we do like a bit of retro horror and are charmed by its ghoulishness all the same.

Cards on the table, next up is **Library Of Ruina**. A visual novel blended with a card-based strategy game, it's definitely niche – but it happens to occupy a niche I, personally, am super-into. Guests to the library – this is strictly an invitation-only establishment – are offered the chance to win big through a deckbuilding duel or else find themselves turned into a book and placed on its well-stacked shelves. As you're playing on the librarians' side, the deck is obviously stacked in your favour... or is it? Off-beat, mysterious, and challenging, it's a shame we have to leave this intriguing volume on the shelf.

PS5 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE NEW GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

Baldur's Gate 3

Based on fifth edition Dungeons & Dragons, developer Larian has apparently bottled the essence of only our most electric tabletop sessions to serve up an incredible RPG return. Offering a wealth of options for crafting your own adventurer – and 'yes, and-ing' your choices all the way – the story of how you become the titular city's saviour (or tyrant) feels distinctly your own at every turn.

02

Resident Evil 4

Neither losing sight of its legacy or Leon S Kennedy's characteristic wit, this ground-up remake of one of the best survival horror shooters of all time boasts sharply honed combat, gloriously gory visuals, and even allows Ashley just a touch more independence.

03

Deathloop

Everything we love about Arkane's detailed, dense, and destructive gameplay in a game you'll keep coming back to. Unavoidably, as hero Colt's trapped in a time loop until he can pull off eight kills in a day, while being hunted by Julianna (who can be controlled by another player).

04

Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

A delightful return for the lombax/robot duo, using PS5's power to allow seamless portal hopping and stunning vistas and DualSense to give the comically large arsenal real oomph. A real showpiece that feels marvellous in the hands, and makes the case for PS5 exclusives.

05

God Of War Ragnarök

Mastercrafted to the point that would make Brok and Sindri blush, this apocalyptic father-son adventure pushes Kratos and Atreus to their limits. Building on the last game, everything from combat to level design is snappier, and it's a gorgeous end to the world.

06
NEW

Dragon's Dogma 2

Toss saurians over your shoulder to lob them off cliffs, clutch onto griffins for dear life as they soar away, or simply combo chimeras into oblivion. From fights with big beasties to how you solve quests, this RPG epic bends to how you play while offering a challenge worth rising to.

07

Alan Wake 2

Remedy lets its freak flag fly in this twisting tale of two protagonists. As both FBI profiler Saga Anderson and author Alan you crisscross realities, blasting Taken and chasing pages. Layered, even a touch experimental, you've not heard one quite like this before.

08

Demon's Souls

Not many games allow you to feel the thrum of a gigantic heart in the controller. From sword slashes against nightmarish creatures to feeling magic fill your hands, this stunning recreation of the PS3 classic is a tour of just what makes PS5 so great.

09

Uncharted: Legacy Of Thieves Collection

The best got better. Presenting Nathan Drake's final outing alongside spin-off The Lost Legacy, this collection implements a range of PS5 features. Higher framerates smooth out the action, haptic feedback boosts gunfights, and 3D audio adds a new dimension to the banter.

10

Marvel's Spider-Man 2

Two heroes prove to be better than one with this smart sequel. The incredibly lush NYC is bigger, and slicker to web-swing and web-glide around, and missions have you brawling and sneaking through some superbly designed and unique areas. Spidey senses tingled.

11

Final Fantasy VII Rebirth

PS1 overworld traipsing is reimagined here with ridiculous depth, making for one massive globetrotting RPG epic. Combat levels up from the first game, mixing together real-time hack-and-slash with slower commands for high-octane strategising.

12

Control Ultimate Edition

Jesse Faden's mind-bending, environment-destroying, object-chucking, new weird adventure sings on PS5. A framerate of 60fps delights, and Remedy's use of ray tracing is among the best we've seen. The sole problem is you're able to pick only one of two visual options.

13

Dead Space

This remake is a reminder that the USG Ishimura is one of the best science-fiction haunted houses in the biz. Modernising touches not only give Isaac Clarke a voice but also keep long-time fans guessing by reinventing familiar necromorph encounters.

14

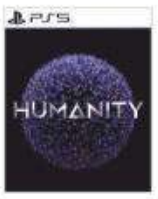
Hitman 3

On PS5, Agent 47's latest hit list looks beautiful – oh boy, those reflections! The good news is not only can you play the latest missions on PS5, you can replay all missions from Hitman and Hitman 2 inside IO's new PS5-developed engine. That's *a lot* of content.

15

Tekken 8

Boasting a roster of returning favourites alongside new faces, and introducing mechanics that make every bout snappier, this fighter hits hard and fast. Looking better than ever only on current-gen hardware, busting out your Wind God Fist has never before felt so satisfying.

16 

Humanity
Channelling the bizarre spirit of PS1 puzzlers, this surreal quest to guide a populace through blocky mazes leans on modern tech to deliver sheer scope and spectacle. It helps that you, as a little shiba inu, must lead the way, becoming humanity's saviour.

17

Pentiment
Ever looked at a tapestry and thought: what if I could play that? And investigate a murder over the course of many years? Thankfully, there's no need to worry about being booted from the museum, as this excellent choice-driven narrative is playable at home.

18

Street Fighter 6
The streets come to PS5 in spectacular fashion. With a mix of fan-favourite fighters and excellent newcomers, the fighting is easier to get into than ever, yet just as deep. An in-depth story mode is more middleweight, but still vibrant and fun. An excellent round.

19

Helldivers 2
It's time to liberate the galaxy and spread democracy far and wide in the name of Super Earth. This tongue-in-cheek bug and 'bot shooter always brings you back for another round of co-op chaos. Just mind the friendly fire when you pepper the planet with orbital strikes.

20

Monster Hunter Rise
Though its maps may be smaller than those of Monster Hunter: World, everything else is souped-up, whether that's inventive new animal allies, your weapon combos, the vibrant feudal Japan styling, or the rampaging monster hordes. Go big... and save your home!

21

Gran Turismo 7
Like taking a bath in luxury motor oil while Yamauchi and the rest of Polyphony Digital relax you with cosy car history. The good vibes are matched by fantastic visual fidelity, and car handling enhanced by the DualSense controller for unparalleled driving feedback.

22

Solar Ash
Playing like a cross between Jet Set Radio and Sonic, gliding through the Ultravoid feels buttery-smooth. The subtle rumble of the DualSense offers an immersive layer to both movement and the action of pinning down an enemy. This is well worth losing yourself in.

23

Neon White
Fusing Doom-like blasting, speedy platforming, and card-based puzzling together in one heady, lightning-fast mix, Neon White is a jolt to the system like little else. Pure, electric gaming bliss that'll have you playing again and again to shave seconds off your best times.

24

Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown
In a hop, skip, and a time-warping jump, this once-beloved series has parkoured its way back into our hearts with a new protagonist, Sargon. Movement and combat both possess layers that are a joy to peel back throughout this metroidvania return-to-form.

25

EA Sports FC 24
FIFA's replacement represents a total overhaul. Men and women are mixed together in FUT to create limitless Three Lions/Lionesses combos. Individual PlayStyles transform gameplay, while presentation is as good as we've ever seen. Golazzo.

PLAY ON

Know what you like and looking for more? Here are alternatives to enjoy on your PS5

Pentiment isn't just worth paying attention to because of its gorgeous, medieval-inspired visuals – it's also one of this generation's most compelling murder mysteries thanks to a commitment to allowing you plenty of freedom. And if you liked *that*, try these.

PICK #1

Inkulinati
Get inked

If Pentiment left you longing to leaf through an illuminated manuscript or two, but its freeform flow overwhelmed you, look no further than this strategy title. With the power of the Living Ink in your palm, you'll conjure quite the menagerie for turn-based bouts. Frogs with jaunty little hats, cats of the clergy, and even farting donkeys can lead the charge across the page. Playful presentation and a very silly sense of humour disguise what is, in fact, a brain-tickling roguelite with joyful depths hidden in the margins.

PICK #2

Return Of The Obra Dinn
Don't call it a comeback

With bold, vector-like graphics, Obra Dinn stands out visually just like Pentiment, and places an equal emphasis on solving a mystery – just what happened to the crew of this ship that's washed ashore? Nothing good, it turns out. Less freeform and more logic puzzle, it's up to you to use a special watch to revisit the moments before various crew members' demises and deduce what happened to them all by piecing together clues from each snippet of the tale. It's incredibly satisfying when you get the right answers.

PICK #3

Disco Elysium: The Final Cut
Mystery's not dead

You're in Revachol to investigate a murder. But while the leads you choose to follow can be as freeform as Pentiment's, the murder is only the start of your journey. The game's as often about the interior of the character you're inhabiting – a washed-up failure of a detective – as what's going on around you. Like in Pentiment, though, decisions have big consequences for the story, though here it's matched with plenty of tabletop-RPG-style dice rolls for myriad often-bizarre skills to check against.

There's no combat, but plenty of dicey skill checks.

PS4 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE LAST GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

Red Dead Redemption 2

You won't find another open world quite like this, the streets of Los Santos paling in comparison to this gorgeous, realistic western sprawl. Arthur Morgan's wild west adventure is epic, emotional, and has enough teasing mysteries on every horizon for no two cowboys' journeys to feel the same. With train robberies, tootin' headshots, and racists to kill, there's never a dull moment in Rockstar's greatest.

02

Grand Theft Auto V

Laughing in the face of other cross-gen ports, GTA V on PS4 is more than a mere HD remaster. Upped to a glorious 1080p, it weaves together everything that made the PS3 original great, with new music, more dynamic weather, and a game-changing FPS mode.

03

God Of War

A departure in some ways but a resounding return in others, Kratos is back with a son *and* a ruddy big axe. Taking the legend from Greek to Norse mythology, this entry brings a lot to the table while improving on what was core to the earlier series' identity.

04

The Last Of Us Part II

Arguably the original is holistically better but there are few games that push PS4 to its limits as this sequel does. With near-photoreal visuals, emotional twists that land, and enough new ideas to ensure you're always thinking, this is a slick followup.

05

Dreams

This is a feature-laden platform of artistic tools that enables you to create everything from characters, elements, and scenes to entire games, and resets any ideas about what a console 'game' should be and do. Dreams should be installed on every PS4.

06

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Game Of The Year Edition

The White Wolf's epic journey is an RPG experience like no other on PS4. It's been made even more spectacular with this gigantic pack stuffed with DLC, making it a must-have part of any gaming library.

07

Assassin's Creed Odyssey

A beautiful open world where every Greek island tells a unique story, AC Odyssey is a epic in the truest sense, with lively writing, mythical beasts to battle, and a poignant Assassin's Creed story that lays the table for all the delicious lore to come. A brilliant spectacle.

08

Horizon Zero Dawn

A staggeringly large world that condenses cracking combat, accessible systems, and uncut eye candy into an action RPG that will please anyone. In Aloy, PlayStation might just have a new icon. Come for the robo-fights, stay for the exquisitely dense mythology.

09

Marvel's Spider-Man

Borrowing heavily from Rocksteady's acclaimed Batman series, this delivers the heart and soul of Marvel's superhero. It ticks every box you could ask for: perfect web-swinging, a powerful story, a roster of classic villains, and all of New York City to defend.

10

Persona 5 Royal

The most stylish JRPG ever made finds its definitive form in expanded release Royal. It combines dark and moving teen angst with unforgettable friendships that power you up in the heart-invading dungeons, and sets the gold standard for the genre.

11

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

FromSoftware's latest adventure repackages its unflinchingly difficult combat into a fantastical take on feudal Japan. More accessible than Bloodborne but layered with equally clever and subtle ideas, this is director Hidetaka Miyazaki's best yet.

12

Bloodborne

With the finest third-person melee combat in gaming, droolworthy art design, and the most twisted monsters imaginable, this is a gorgeously gothic must-have. The Old Hunters expansion adds enough nightmare fuel to make a return to Yharnam essential.

13

Monster Hunter: World

Presenting a vibrant open world, light on story but heavy on monster-mashing action, this is the most accessible entry in the series yet. Perfecting the feel-good grind through its complex systems and pitch-perfect multiplayer, it's a PS4 must-play.

14

Resident Evil 2

Powered by the RE Engine, this remake is more than a classic game with a facelift. The new Tyrant and improved zombie AI add tension, and fresh areas not seen in the PS1 classic update the core gameplay making this Resi 2 a celebration of PS1 *and* PS4.

15

Yakuza 0

Set in Japan in the '80s, this is the perfect entry point to the long-running series. Bouncing between two heroes, you take part in a crime thriller by bashing enemies into dropping piles of cash, and undertake side-quests that include stealthily buying pornography.

16

Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

Solving your own murder seems hard enough, but you quickly find it's a single domino in a whole conspiracy run. Fortunately, as a ghost, that's where you shine, controlling objects poltergeist-style to untangle puzzle-box murders moments before others cop it.

17

Psychonauts 2

Level design and narrative mesh together in this long-awaited sequel. Bounce around vibrant, ever-creative platform worlds inside other peoples' minds as you help them conquer trauma – and save the world. Ever-warm, the script is one of the funniest around.

18

Nier: Automata

Few games require immediate replaying, but this *demands* it. The twisty-turny story reveals more just when you think you're done, and the android combat as you explore is top-notch thanks to PlatinumGames' expertise in creating character action titles.

19

Mass Effect Legendary Edition

A space opera in game form. Explore the galaxy as you try to stop a universe-wide threat, building a team of the best as you go. The adventures are better than ever in this smoothed-over version. A fan of science-fiction sagas? You owe it to yourself to have one of your own.

20

Days Gone

On the surface this seems to be a step backwards: a testosterone-fuelled Freaker-killing adventure, one man and his bike versus the apocalypse. Slowly you realise Bend Studio's playing with you, and everything's flipped on its head – while the action's excellent throughout.

21

Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age

JRPGs don't get more classic-feeling than this, but DQ embraces its traditional qualities, giving its turn-based fights and Toriyama-designed visuals a modern overhaul. This is an adventure that'll stick with you.

22

Dishonored 2

The followup to a PS3 great, mixing a creative skillset with impressive level design to create a Kaldwin-ning immersive sim. From the shifting rooms of The Clockwork Mansion to learning to link your powers, there's so much scope for experimenting.

23

Alien: Isolation

Explore Ridley Scott's original vision of a horrifying future in startling fidelity, as this game recreates the tension with an attention to detail that borders on the obsessive. It's time to remember what made the xenomorph so scary... and then get killed by it.

24

Shadow Of The Colossus

Bluepoint completely overhauls the visuals of Team Ico's masterpiece but still manages to match the original step-for-step in its remake. New controls and a beautiful photo mode add to the package. Wander's tragic quest has never looked or played better.

25

New Star GP

This lo-fi racer is the best of both worlds, finding pole position as it pursues a dedication to career mode with arcadey joy. Its lack of licensing just makes it more lightweight, able to have fun with evolving racing rivalries and destruction that'd make famous marques cringe.

TAYLOR MADE DEALS

Watching the pennies? We'll help you play more without breaking the bank

UNDER £20

Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order

£16.95 approx (PS5, amazon.co.uk)

This is the price you're looking for

With The Acolyte nearly on Disney Plus, it's impossible to remain immune to the Star Wars bug. But in an Extended Universe stuffed to the brim with more hits and misses than could fit in a Jawa's sandcrawler you've got to be selective about which media you spend your time on. Thankfully, Respawn's Star Wars Jedi titles are among the best tales in the galaxy. It helps that Cal's journey to reclaim a piece of his Jedi legacy is tremendous fun to play, with each planet giving you ample reason to 'saber and force it up. This PS5 release runs smoothly as butter.

UNDER £15

Atelier Sophie 2

£14.15 approx (PS4, amazon.co.uk)

Cut-price cauldrons

Don't let the number on the box throw you off – Atelier is such a long series that it's fruitless to worry too much about play order. All you need to know is that alchemist Sophie has been pulled into a strange dream world alongside her mentor, Plachta, and it's up to her to help save this collective consciousness from nightmare peril. Cue the usual loop of crafting progressively stronger items and gear to defeat enemies, with some of the best alchemy and fighting mechanics in the series. Naturally, there are lashings of cute character moments as well.

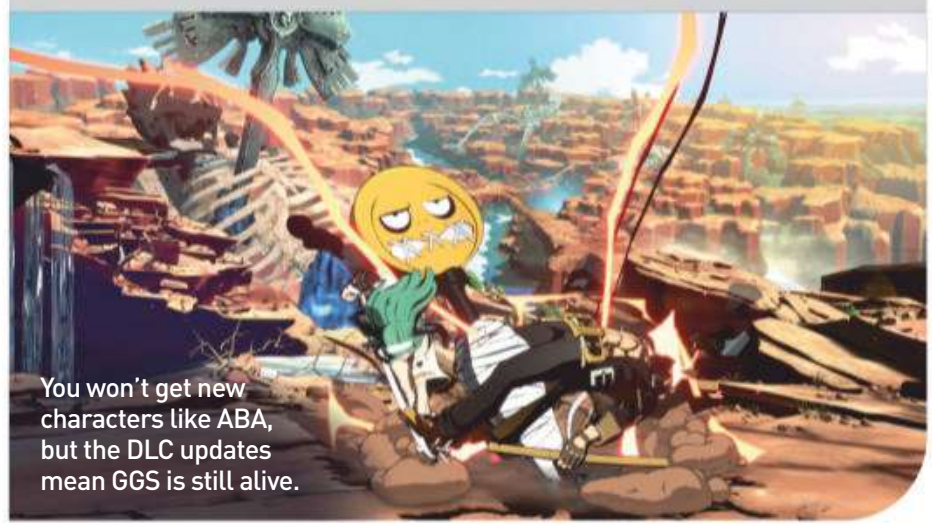
UNDER £10

Guilty Gear Strive

£9.95 approx (PS4, thegamecollection.net)

Smell of the deal

Don't worry about the platform here – this cross-gen release should entitle you to a free PS5 upgrade while still allowing you a total KO on the last-gen box's price. Developer Arc System Works is behind other heavy-hitting fighters such as Dragon Ball FighterZ and Granblue Fantasy Versus – but this is the series that put the studio on the map, souped up with gorgeous graphics that look like an anime come to life (for real this time), and a stripped-back fighting system that keeps the focus on fast-paced clashes rather than overly complex inputs.



You won't get new characters like ABA, but the DLC updates mean GGS is still alive.

PSVR2 Hall of fame

THE VIRTUAL REALITY HITS YOU HAVE TO PLAY

01

Synapse

Telekinesis and guns make a wonderful combo in VR. With one mapped to your left hand and the other to your right, you feel like a conductor of chaos as you blast your way through a rogue colonel's mind to uncover secrets. Eye-tracking is wonderfully used to target your telekinesis, meaning you can slam enemies all over the place as you reload your arsenal. It's got a roguelite structure, so you'll keep coming back.

02

Horizon: Call Of The Mountain

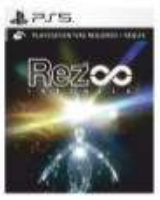
Manages to make level after level of climbing compelling with different environments to pull yourself up through, the Sense controllers allowing for neat player expression. Just make sure you take a break, or all that spider monkeying will make your arms throb.

03

Star Wars: Tales From The Galaxy's Edge

Who shot first? *You*. Tactile controls make being a droid techie-turned-scoundrel a blast(er), from pulling gear off your body to using tools to meddle with machines. A bonus mode allows for lightsaber waggling too.

04



Rez Infinite

When you thought Testuya Mizuguchi's synaesthesia shooter was done, it moves to a new beat. Laden with sharp particle effects, twitchy controls make this unmissable, with eye-tracking aiming a revelation for this experiential shoot-'em-up.

05

Tetris Effect: Connected

While also on PS5, Mizuguchi's trippy, transcendent take on the block-based puzzler is nothing short of a masterpiece in PSVR2, placing you within a world of tumbling tiles like never before, enhanced from the base version with more collaborative elements.

06

No Man's Sky

The frontier is far from final, this free refresh for the latest headset propelling you to the stars. All the prior updates are here, and you've an unmatched level of fidelity to reach out and touch the bizarre randomly rolled planets you uncover (and to fiddle with your ship).

07

Moss: Book II

Both rodent puzzle platformers benefit from PSVR2 enhancements, but the star performer of the pair is this sequel that's every bit the mouse's whiskers. As charming as ever, expanded combat options mean you feel even more connected to your li'l hero, Quill.

08

Gran Turismo 7

Ever driven a car? Then you'll know what to expect. GT7's already incredible simulation races gain a new level of immersion simply from checking your GPS and mirrors and seeing the courses whizz by. It's only a new view mode, yet it's enough to be a must-try.

09

Before Your Eyes

Blink and you will indeed miss it. Put down the Sense controllers, as here you interact using eye tracking, piecing together your life scene by scene, progressing whenever your peepers close (generously, the mechanic can be turned off if you want to see everything).

10

Little Cities: Bigger!

Waving your hands like a conductor, you paint with land and accent with buildings. This is a town-builder toybox, with management mechanics sanded down to an accessible degree, and lots of delightful details like your city's denizens looking up to wave at you.

11

Stilt

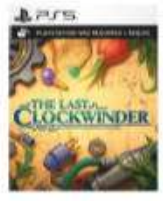
This one's at its best when you throw your arms wide and embrace the silliness. Straightforward platforming is reinvented in VR, and allows the simple joy of hurling yourself around to shine – to say nothing of the fact that upgrades enable you to strap cannons to your feet.

12

Song In The Smoke Rekindled

The devs have taken great pains to ensure this stripped-back survival game remains immersive at all times, placing much of what you need to do, from skinning pelts to pinging arrows, directly in your hands. Be careful to keep the dark at bay at night, too.

13



The Last Clockwinder

This spatial puzzler is all about putting things in the right place, whether that's flinging objects around or putting yourself to work. Thanks to the ability to summon clones, you're quite the helping hand (now if only we could do that at PLAY Towers).

14

The Last Worker

Work hard, revolt harder. As a token final human working alongside machines in a send-up of big online retailers, you need to balance the oddly compelling mundanity of sorting and organising packages with sneaking around vents to bring down big business.

15

Arizona Sunshine 2

The familiar survivalist beats of a 'one man against the apocalypse' setup are boosted by making that 'one man and his dog.' Zombie-offing action is already elevated in VR, but adding man's best friend to your arsenal makes this title one of the best in show.

PSVR Hall of fame

GREAT EXPERIENCES TO THIS DAY

01

Astro Bot Rescue Mission

This pint-sized adventure packs charm in spades even if it isn't exactly chock-full of challenge. Bringing the classic puzzle platformer formula bang up to date in PSVR, it won't take many levels before you're calling out, "Beam me up, Botty!" Also, the nippers will love it.

02

The Persistence

This first-person horror roguelike offers perfectly sized chunks of survival bursts. It's everything you'd expect from a full PS4 release, but in PSVR it's filled with clever ideas, unique weapons, genuine jump scares, and fab looks – plus great couchplay as well.

03

Star Wars: Squadrons

A fan's dream come true: experience epic Star Wars space battles from the cockpits of the films' most famous starfighters. Whether you're flying a TIE fighter or X-wing there's absolutely no thrill like skimming the surface of a Star Destroyer in PS VR.

04

Resident Evil VII: Biohazard

Can you can go eye-to-eye with the Bakers? Playing in VR raises the tension to almost unbearable levels and has gameplay benefits such as face-aiming, which makes shooting a lot easier. A brilliant example of how VR can improve already great games.

05

Blood & Truth

The truth? You can't handle the truth. But if you can, then you'll discover one of PSVR's best shooters, tied to the kind of slick cinematic narrative we're used to from Sony's non-VR releases. Blood & Truth is one of the most complete games for PSVR.

06

Beat Saber

With your PSVR headset firmly on and PS Move controllers in hand, Beat Saber feels like the game both pieces of hardware were made for. In it you have to master songs and challenges by swiping your neon swords through the air and dodging with your head.

07

Iron Man VR

With a finely-crafted control setup that enables flight within small sandbox maps, and gives you the option to inhabit the designer shoes of the billionaire playboy too, Iron Man VR is an almost-perfect interpretation of the famous Avenger. It's a PSVR must-play.

08

Hitman 3

Every mission in the World Of Assassination trilogy can be played in PSVR via the latest entry in the series. That's a *lot* of murderous action. It all plays brilliantly too, with the act of puzzling through hits as Agent 47 perfectly suited to virtual reality. One of PSVR's best.

09

To The Top

This creative platform-puzzler enables you to scamper, jump, and skate across its 35 sandbox worlds with the aid of your PS Move controllers. It's as physically demanding to play as it is perplexing, and all the better for it. To The Top is a PSVR one-off.

10

I Expect You To Die 2: The Spy and The Liar

A spy comedy offering a front-row seated experience. Known as The Phoenix to your foes, you thwart villains across six missions delightfully steeped in genre tropes. Short, silly, and slick – like only the best agents.

WHAT'S NEW PLUS-SY CAT?

Digging into the random acts of gaming a lengthy PS Plus subscription offers

May is a time of deep lore, with certain internet weirdos such as yours truly prompted to do their best Justin Timberlake impression at the mere mention of the month's name, and others holding out the whole year just for the fourth so they can say The Thing.

As such, May's PS Plus offered four titles with worlds dictated by similarly arcane rules. On PS5 and PS4 there was footie game **EA Sports FC 24** and the **Lightfall** expansion for online science fantasy shooter **Destiny 2**, and then only on PS5 was speed running cyberpunk slasher **Ghostrunner 2**.

In this column, however, we're going to attempt to decode charming action adventure **Tunic**, available on both consoles. This is more than a throwback to isometric titans of yore, dev Andrew Shouldice leveraging the bird's-eye view to fill the screen with secrets and hidden paths. This is one title you'll turn over and over – especially as the conundrums you need to solve are as essential as how to play.

As you explore, you gather pages of the game's manual, offering clues as to what to do and where to go. However, almost all text in Tunic is written in a constructed language, with only a few interpretive illustrations and the odd word in your selected language to give a whisper of context.

Still, don't let that deter you from following your wee fox protagonist all over this pop-up-book fairytale. Just don't forget to dodge and block or the next foe that wallops you will send you right back to your last bookmark.

Familiar trappings aren't here for nostalgia's sake; they offer enough anchor points amid a sea of unknowns to make the whole thing engrossing. True, the big picture you eventually reveal is nothing earth-shattering, with the asking and investigation of the question being much more fun than the ultimate answer.

Ooh, aren't they sweet? It'd be a shame if the beasties got the little fox on your watch...

DIGITAL OFFER

FOR PRINT SUBSCRIPTION DEALS, TURN TO PAGE 66

PS5 | PS4 | PSVR | RETRO
HALL OF FAME
RANKED: THE BEST PS5, PS4, AND PSVR GAMES
PLAY
NO.1 FOR PS5
ISSUE 41
JULY 2024
RPG SPECIAL!
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VISIONS OF MANA
18 years on: how Square Enix planned the perfect return for the series
→ DEV INTERVIEW
FINAL FANTASY XIV
The secrets to designing job classes detailed
THE PERSONA DEV RETURNS!
SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI V: VENGEANCE
EXCLUSIVE ACCESS The original demon summoner returns!
How dual campaigns, hundreds of devilish allies, and a ruined Tokyo make for the RPG of a lifetime
FIGHT ON!
We travel to Japan to get beaten up – all in the name of gaming science
→ EXPERT VERDICT
STELLAR BLADE: DRESSED TO KILL?
Troubleshooting Sony's live-wire cyborg slash-'em-up
→ BLAST FROM THE PAST
SLEEPING DOGS DRAGS US BACK IN
Revisiting the Hong Kong crime caper we can't quit
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RetroStation

114 Silent Hill: Downpour

Getting clean and fighting dirty in the prison shower

HIGHLIGHTS

MEMORY CARD: PROTOTYPE 108 | DEFENDING: SHADOW THE HEDGEHOG 109 | CLASSIC GAME: SLEEPING DOGS 110 | PLUS POINTS: ALONE IN THE DARK: THE NEW NIGHTMARE 112 | A BRIEF HISTORY OF... HISTORICAL GAMES 113 | PARTING SHOT: SILENT HILL: DOWNPOUR 114

DON'T DELETE

Save icons for these June moments spin in the PLAY hive mind. Do you remember this?

5 YEARS

After the N.Sane Trilogy remaster sold approximately 50 billion copies, it was inevitable we'd get Crash Team Racing Nitro-Fueled too. Still a fun racer though, letting you drive with all your favourite Crash characters.

10 YEARS

Try to solve your own murder in mediocre ghost detective game Murdered: Soul Suspect. Honestly, the dead detective you play as is so irritating in this one, our suspect list is still narrowed down to 'everyone else on Earth' and we're beginning to root for the killer.

25 YEARS

A quarter of a century ago, we were introduced to John Tanner in PS1's wonderful Driver, a game inspired by movie car chases. Give us 25 more years to attempt it and we might just be able to get past its famously evil tutorial level.

MEMORY CARD

Prototype

It's 15 years since we slaughtered thousands of innocent NPCs

Radical Entertainment also made The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction on PS2. Anyone else spot a theme?

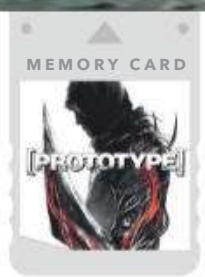
Warning: mild spoiler for Marvel's Spider Man 2 ahead. Ready? Sure? Right... Isn't the bit where you get to play as Venom brilliant? Peter Parker and Miles Morales are both wonderful good boys, but sometimes you just want to cut loose and become a terrifying, tendril-covered monster.

It's a nasty fantasy that Radical Entertainment nailed perfectly with Prototype. Playing as Alex 'Grrr' Mercer, you're a science experiment with superpowers such as the ability to consume NPCs to regain health, arms that can turn into claws and blades, and the wonderfully named 'Tendril Barrage', which allows you to shoot (yes!) a barrage of tendrils.

"I want a new one NOW," demands reader **Peters Nathan**, a man so passionate about this he seems to have flipped his surname with his first name in protest. "This was such an underrated game," agrees **Dennis Van Beveren**. "Hope they remaster it for current consoles." Activision did actually remaster both Prototype and its sequel on PS4 for the 'Biohazard Collection', which stretched the definition of 'remaster' further than one of Alex's superlimbs.

The sequel isn't as well-loved anyway, lacking the indulgent brain-off fun of the first game. "The sequel improved certain things but the first one was the best," believes **Mark Allen Trent Jr**. "I wouldn't mind a remaster." If anyone in the marketing department for that PS4 remaster is reading this, maybe strike that one off your CV.

"I want a sequel," says **Nick Paschall**. "We got next-gen Infamous, now we need this," he adds, presumably referring to Infamous Second Son on PS4. It is tantalising to imagine what grisly chaos Mercer could create in a game with PS5 power behind it. Sadly, Radical Entertainment hasn't made an original game in years, as it's one of the many studios that Activision forces to work on Call Of Duty, polishing the soldiers' digital boots. A crying shame, because to put it in the wise and profound words of reader **Shawn Hunter** "we need more." Hear hear!



INFO

PUB Activision

DEV Radical Entertainment

RELEASED ON PS4, PS3

RELEASE 2009

IF YOU LIKE THAT, TRY THIS... Saints Row 4 is a marvellous superhero sandbox with great powers and even better jokes. Hugely underrated!

Join in the conversation as we celebrate PlayStation's past, present, and future with our community: you can email us at play@futurenet.com.

BYTE-SIZE BITS

Essential numbers that add together to tell you everything you need to know about the game.

2,100,000

Copies sold. Sadly, the sequel didn't reach similar sales, putting the series on hold. Sob.

02

The number of weeks between the release of this and fellow superhero sandbox Infamous.

79

Out of 100 on Metacritic for the PS3 version. The *absolutely* correct score for a terrific 7/10.

DEFENDING

Shadow The Hedgehog

Oscar Taylor-Kent argues that the black-and-red 'hog's first appearance is king

With Knuckles cemented as Sonic's ally, the hedgehog hero needed a new rival come the big tenth anniversary game, Sonic Adventure 2. Enter Shadow The Hedgehog. Originally sealed away by Dr Robotnik's own mad scientist grandfather, when he's freed he works with the doc to fulfil Robotnik senior, Gerald Robotnik's, posthumous destructive machinations.

But it's not evil for evil's sake. Nor is Shadow really working for either Robotnik. His real goal is to avenge Maria Robotnik, who he was raised alongside on the orbital Space Colony ARK. When the colony was raided by the government, she was gunned down as she helped Shadow escape. His memories of her final words are muddled – but the event isn't. The extrajudicial war crime literally occurs in a Sonic game. It adds a lot of depth to the 'dark' half of the game, and builds out Shadow as a tragic figure, yet one with his own agenda, neither a perfect foil for Sonic nor a simple henchman for Robotnik. He's a full 'hog in his own right.

Yet it's revealed that Gerald Robotnik played them all from beyond the grave. Shadow wasn't the true ultimate lifeform, and the doc's secret orbital laser has been programmed to destroy both itself and Earth. Taking a back seat as the others try to stop it, Shadow is prompted by Amy to remember Maria's real final words: "For all the people who live on that planet... give them a chance to be happy... let them live for their dreams." Springing into action, he helps save the day, and sacrifices himself in the process.

It's the perfect conclusion to his character arc in the game. Perhaps so much that while we love his reappearances, they undermine a game that manages to toe the line between heightened action and genuine sincerity. Sayonara, Shadow The Hedgehog.

> FAKER? I THINK YOU'RE THE FAKE HEDGEHOG AROUND HERE."

Mistaken identity plagues the Blue Blur in SA2, but Shadow doesn't love the comparison either.

INFO

MAIN GAMES
Sonic Adventure 2; Sonic Heroes; Shadow The Hedgehog; Sonic The Hedgehog (2006)

STATS
In Shadow The Hedgehog, it's revealed the devilish Black Doom lent his blood to Shadow's creation.

He'll co-star in the third Sonic movie, voiced by Keanu Reeves.

He can utilise the chaos emeralds to use special powers, like the iconic, time-stopping Chaos Control.

SPIN-OFFS
Sega Superstars Tennis; Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed; Sonic Riders; Sonic Rivals

HOW TO PLAY?
Sonic Adventure 2: Battle, PS Store, £6.49

CLASSIC GAME

Sleeping Dogs

The PS3 era's most underrated sandbox

1

2

3

4

1 Sleeping Dogs' sales were slow – and Square Enix lost $67m in 2012. 2 The game's original name was simply True Crime: Hong Kong. 3 A definitive edition landed on PS4 in 2014. 4 Shen rode motorbikes and sailed boats as well as driving cars. 5 "A man who never eats pork buns is never a whole man!"

You can't overstate just how formidably open-world games dominated PS3. In addition to iconic Rockstar sandboxes GTA IV and Red Dead Redemption, we got to enjoy a breathtaking mix of competitors and copycats. There were the Batman romps of Arkham Asylum, the island escapades of Just Cause 2, and the compendium of carnage called Saints Row: The Third. Often lost in discussions of that heavyweight mix is the most underrated of them all: Sleeping Dogs.

That this Hong-Kong-based brawler even became a contender is surprising given the development hell it endured. Initially conceived in 2008 as a sequel to cop sim True Crime: New York City, it would take four years, a name change, and a switch of publishing rights – from Activision Blizzard to Square Enix – before Sleeping Dogs finally made it to console. And while True Crime had been a cult favourite, its spiritual successor surpassed it in every way.

Central to its success was its leading man; Wei Shen is an undercover officer with a dubious history, which plays a role not just in the story but in how you tackle the case you're on (initially, to bring down the Sun On Yee triad). Despite being a man of the law, you're given free rein to commit crimes, with a heat meter denoting your current wanted level. XP comes in three flavours: Police, Face, and Triad, with the latter rewarding you for bad behaviour, and neatly subverting the usual crime-related procedural-drama tropes.

Combat provides a varied, meaty diet of knuckles and knees. Controlling similarly to Arkham Asylum, every dust-up feels deliciously hard-hitting, but endlessly varied too, befitting Shen's martial arts background. Punches and kicks can be chained into hilariously OTT combos, while destructible scenery enables you to smash heads into plant pots or impale foes on a bed of swordfish snouts. Goons can also be slung around, run forcefully into walls, and basically battered into a bloody pulp in whatever way you desire.

Yet this is so much more than a straightforward beat-'em-up. Indeed, Sleeping Dogs often plays like a noughties greatest hits package: driving mechanics ape classic Need For Speed, bolstered by action hijacks – press ⊗ to leap into a nearby moving vehicle for a true joyride; shooting is similarly satisfying, thanks to a neat bullet-time mechanic influenced by Max Payne; side-activities such as karaoke and mahjong, meanwhile, are obvious callouts to the undisputed king of the Asian gang genre, Yakuza. Yet none of this feels cobbled together, with all of these disparate parts forming a seamless whole.

> **"So much more than a straightforward beat-'em-up; Sleeping Dogs often plays like a noughties greatest hits package."**

Essential to this is the setting. The game's Hong Kong feels like the real place, with the horrifyingly poor and unbelievably wealthy living side-by-side. The game's designers spent seven days in the city and took 20,000 photos in order to mirror reality. While the storyline and side-missions move you along, taking a breather to wander around in the neon-lit streets, bustling markets, and sedate temples feels equally compelling, to the point that one hot-food vendor callout – "You look like you could use a pork bun" – became an office catchphrase for months post-release at PLAY Towers (back when we were still Official PlayStation Magazine).

INFO

PUB Square Enix
DEV United Front Games
RELEASED 2012
GET IT NOW Amazon, £13.39

NEED TO KNOW

1 United Front Games' only previous title was kart sim ModNation Racers.

2 Free-to-play online PC game Triad Wars was set in the same universe.

3 Karaoke tracks include Robert Palmer's Bad Case Of Lovin' You and Air Supply's All Out Of Love.

QUESTION EVERYTHING

The storyline is laced with twists and intrigue, as Wei Shen becomes embroiled in a civil war, soon learning that his bosses are even more corrupt than the guys he's trying to take down.

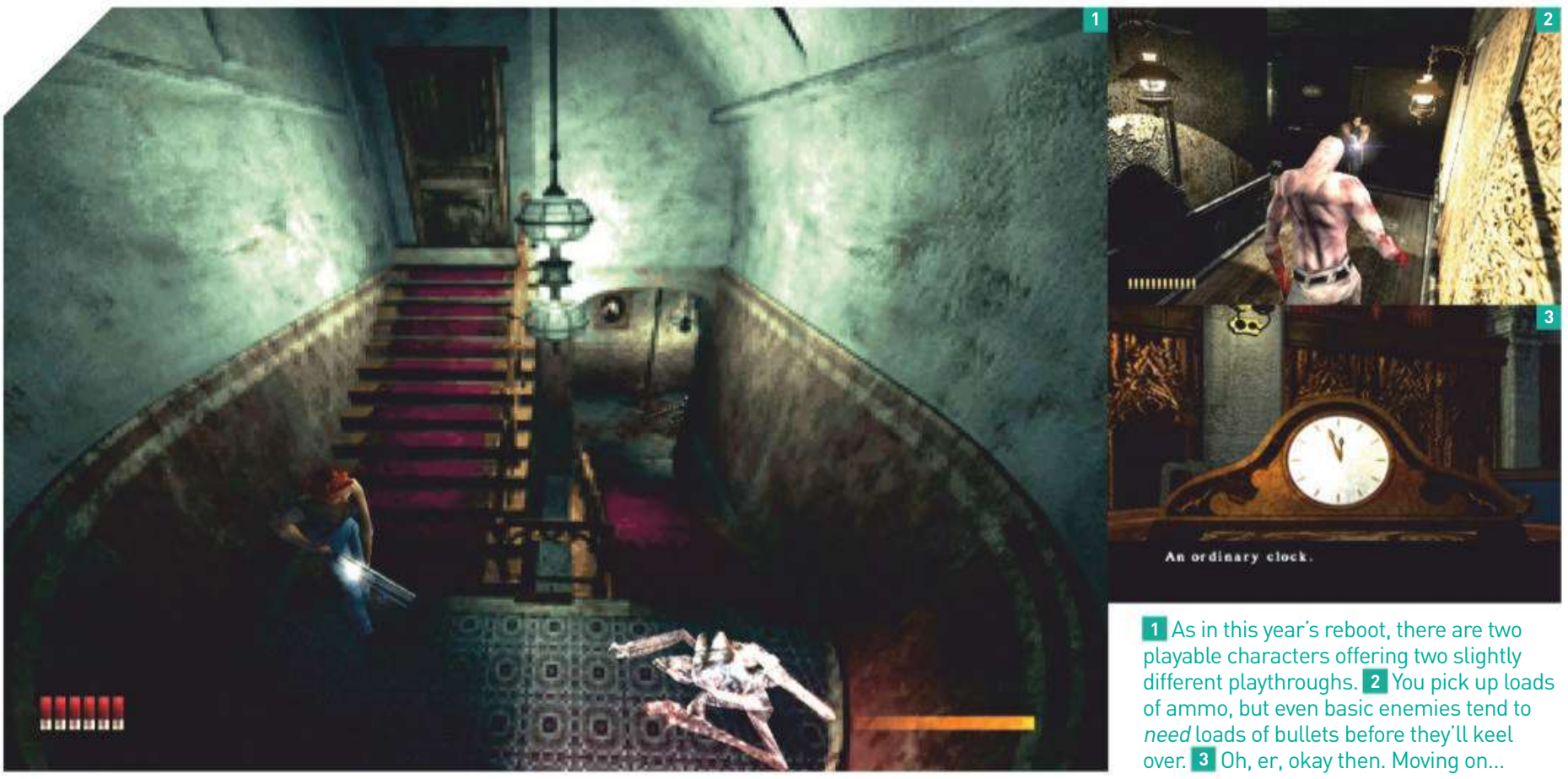
Bringing these corrupt cops and cool crims to life is a string of Hollywood names: Will Yin Lee stars as Shen, alongside Emma Stone, Lucy Liu, and Tim Wilkinson. They breathe reality into tightly scripted cutscenes, and keep you gripped throughout this morally grey fable. This covers 30 main missions, while side-quests and other indulgences fully immerse you in being Wei Shen: hunting his sensei's 12 lost animal statues, or dating, or joining a fight club, or hacking security cameras, or stopping off at massage parlours for a health boost – or, of course, wolfing down just one more irresistible pork bun. ■

5

PLUS POINTS

Alone In The Dark: The New Nightmare

Here comes our favourite cartoon character, Daffy Dark



1 As in this year's reboot, there are two playable characters offering two slightly different playthroughs. 2 You pick up loads of ammo, but even basic enemies tend to *need* loads of bullets before they'll keel over. 3 Oh, er, okay then. Moving on...

Despite doing the whole 'survival horror with fixed camera angles' thing years before Resident Evil, Alone In The Dark has always been its less popular little brother. But The New Nightmare does one thing well that Resi was, arguably, struggling with at the time: even today it has effective jump scares and unsettlingly creepy moments. Not as powerful as they were back in 2001, but still impressive.

Mind you, it really highlights the need for Sony to make more of an effort with its emulators. Being able to save at any time is a blessing,[1] as is the rewind function. However, the ability to remap the controls would give this experience a real boost. We adapt fairly quickly as we play, but they never feel *great*.[2]

ALONE SHARK

The game has flaws, but most of them are also present in Code: Veronica, which came out the year before. They include bad controls and comically poor writing. There's one issue that could've been mitigated in 2024, though. This is the PS1 version, not the PS2 version with improved graphics. This matters because item highlighting is inconsistent, so the clearer your environment, the lower your chance of missing something. Even so, it's worth trying as part of your Plus subscription.

INFO

PUB Infogrames
DEV Darkworks
RELEASED 2001

FOOTNOTES 1 Although it negates the system of being able to save at any time via collectible items. **2** Tank controls on the D-pad, and torch aiming on a stick? Urgh.

HAVE YOUR SAY

Readers tell us what they think of our choice

"BEST ENTRY! GRAPHICS WAS AMAZING ON PS1. NEED A REMAKE ASAP"
@alifitness2

"MY FAVORITE CLASSIC HORROR GAME... THE SCARY MUSIC, THE PUZZLES, THE ATMOSPHERE... EVERYTHING IS GREAT"
Diaa Mohamed

"STILL NOTHING ELSE SCARES ME OR MAKES ME FEEL SO VULNERABLE THAN THIS GAME"
Conor Bailey

▷ Adding up **PS Plus** as we explore even more of the games catalogue

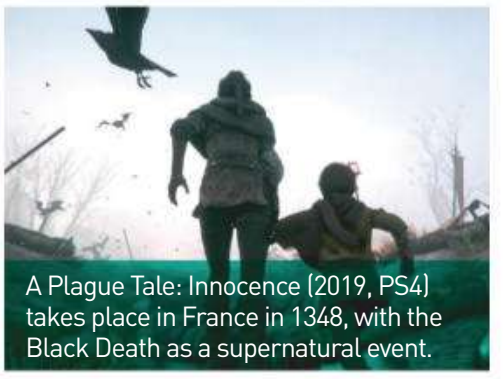
A BRIEF HISTORY OF

Historical games

A quick look back at looking back

Red Dead Revolver (2004, PS2) was set in 1880s America, and was the first entry in Rockstar's Red Dead series.

Assassin's Creed (2007, PS3) was mainly set in 1191, during the Crusades. It started life as a Prince Of Persia game.



A Plague Tale: Innocence (2019, PS4) takes place in France in 1348, with the Black Death as a supernatural event.

Far Cry Primal (2016) is set in 10,000 BC. Resistance: Fall Of Man envisions a 1940s/1950s alien invasion. **Driver: Parallel Lines (2006) is split between 1978 and 2006.** MediEvil (1998) isn't realistic, but *is* specifically set in 1286.

FACTS MATTER

Edutainment that works

Although the fine details are fictional, Black Friday is steeped in fact. Designed to educate players, the narrative combines meaningful, difficult choices with an original but historically accurate story, real photos from the time, and even recordings of speeches by Ayatollah Khomeini. There are also two possible endings, depending on your actions leading up to that point.

1979 REVOLUTION: BLACK FRIDAY IS A 2016 PS4 GAME ABOUT THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION, IN WHICH YOU PLAY AS AN ASPIRING PHOTOJOURNALIST.

Beat-'em-up Dynasty Warriors (PS1, 1997) is set in the Three Kingdoms era.

The Order: 1886 (2015, PS4) featured an alternate Victorian London.

2002's Way Of The Samurai on PS2 was set in Japan in 1878, with multiple choices and a branching story.

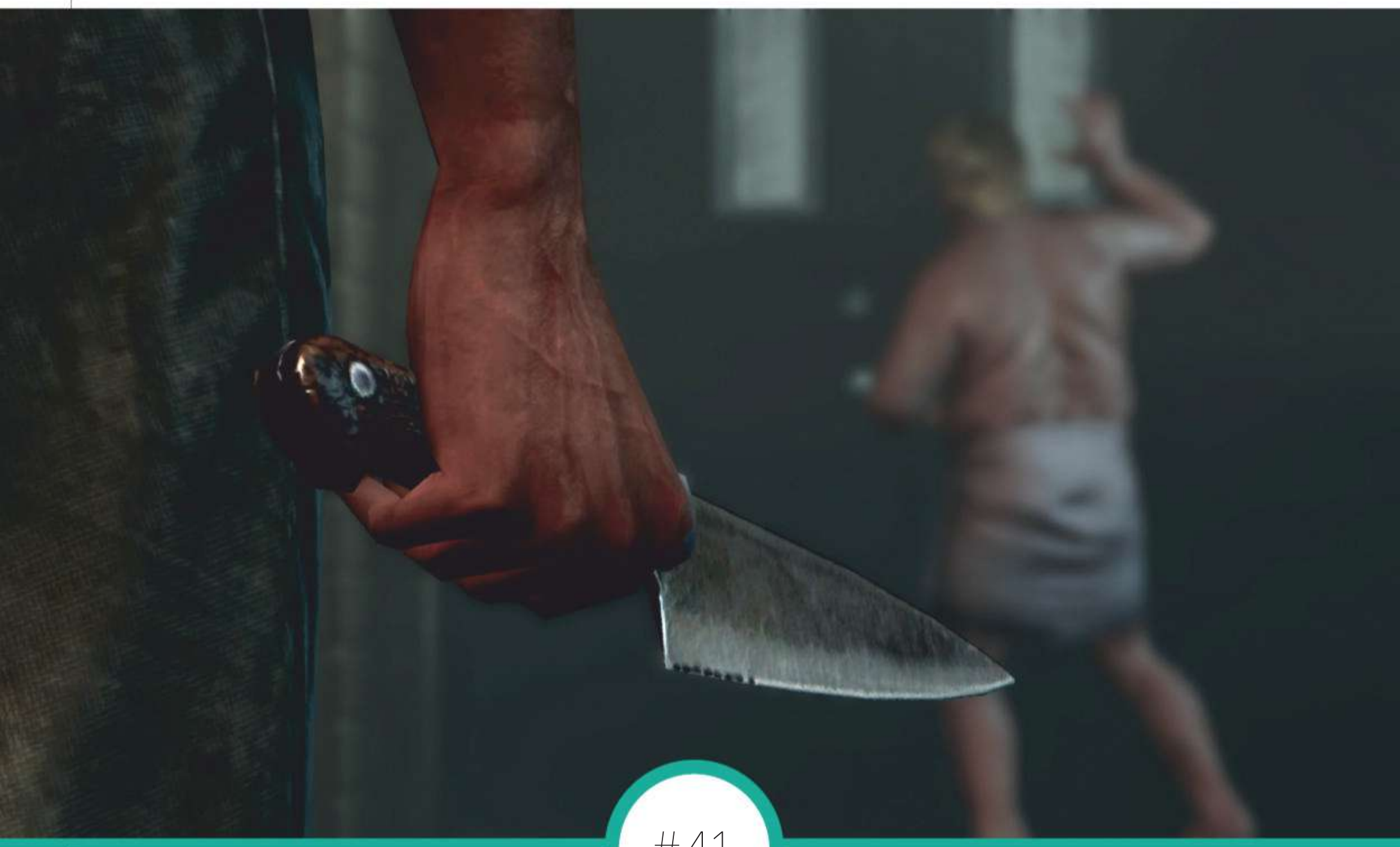
Vampyr, released on PS4 in 2018, is set in London in 1918 during the Spanish flu pandemic, the disease masking the vampirism.

STAY ALERT

Soviet coming from miles away

Command & Conquer: Red Alert (PS1, 1997) was a pretty wild alternate history game. The FMV intro shows Albert Einstein going back in time to kill Hitler with a handshake (yes, really) but this doesn't prevent a global conflict. Stalin's Soviet Union rises instead of the Nazis, and World War 2 still happens. Cue videogame!

▷ Next issue: getting our call sheet for **screen actors** in games



#41

Worth a stab

Few horror games open as effectively as **Silent Hill: Downpour**, with its shower scene

FORMAT PS3 / **PUB** KONAMI / **DEV** VATRA GAMES / **RELEASED** 2012

You're Murphy Pendleton, a convict being led down to the prison showers. The guard gives you some advice: if you turn on the showers, the steam fogs up the security cameras. He's also left you 'a present' on one of the benches, and it's not a nice fluffy towel.

You enter, try the trick with the showers and suddenly the first signs you're in a Silent Hill game emerge, with the clouds of steam imitating the series' famous fog. A brilliant touch. You go to the bench and find a knife. Then another prisoner arrives. At first he seems merely confused. "You don't recognise me, do you?" asks Murphy, eerily calm. "We used to be neighbours."

The other prisoner pounds on the doors but it's hopeless. You're given back control for an incredibly grim combat tutorial. Almost every Silent Hill stars a protagonist with a mysterious past and repressed demons to overcome. It's a tired trope that's haunted too many entries ever since it was done so masterfully in Silent Hill 2.

Downpour's ingenious spin is to have you commit one of the sins you're being punished for. It's not Murphy's only crime, and there are far more revelations to come, but it's still a compelling, confident opening. Sadly, the rest of it derails before you even reach the infamous town of Silent Hill. Stupid bombastic chase sequences and monsters that are about as terrifying as the average birthday card soon doom Downpour to mediocrity. Pour one out for an outstanding intro that belonged in a better game.

TIME TO PLAY? You play pretty much instantly as this is the very opening sequence of the game. You can't lose, either, as your 'opponent' is unarmed and clearly physically weaker than Murphy. Too bad this is also the best five minutes of it, eh?

NEXT MONTH

ON SALE 25 JUNE

STAR WARS OUTLAWS

We've got a good feeling about this

PLAY

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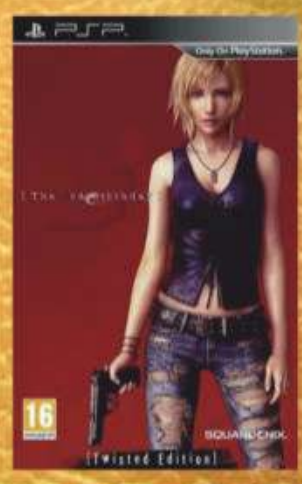

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